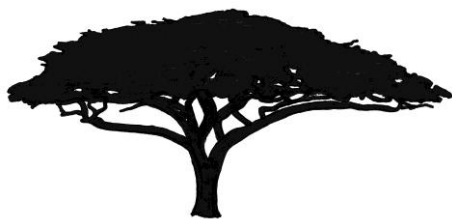


*A Vision  
Renewal  
Resource*

New Life in the Church

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*in the*  
*Church*

CRAIG C. KRAFT

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## Appreciation

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I owe most of what I know about church health to two very special men, my father Dr. Gerald Kraft and my mentor and teammate, Rev. Glen Gibson. Thank you for sharing your knowledge and experiences with me.

This book is dedicated to Glen Gibson. Glen's commitment to planting healthy churches has had been the foundation of Outreach Canada's Church Health and Revitalization Department. He is an outstanding pastor, master coach, gifted teacher, and wonderful friend. My prayers are with you, buddy, as you fight your battle for life. God is in control!



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# Foreword

**T**he past nineteen years of ministry have taught me many lessons. One of those lessons is that people learn better through stories and illustrations than just through lists of facts or numbered points. Therein lies a great challenge for many learners as most of the books and tools that we read about how to help our churches grow or become healthier are usually based on a list of observations and discoveries that are carefully expressed and articulated through the text. Many people are able to read those books and assimilate the information and apply it in their own settings. However, there are many people who struggle to remember all that they have read unless the book sits open on their desk. Consequently we do not always apply what we have read in a book.

We all remember stories, but with the long oral tradition of Africa, I have found that many times when I am asked to speak, most of the comments and questions I receive are in relation to the stories I tell. As I am learning more about the value of a good story, I decided that it was now time for a church health resource to be written in the form of a story, and so the concept for this book was born. This story is about a fictional church and pastor and their struggle to overcome the shackles of stagnation. This church, which I have chosen to call “New Life Church”, represents a conglomeration of many churches that I have worked with over the past several years as a pastor and church health coach.<sup>1</sup> It is the story of a church that has seen exciting times as a new church plant but

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<sup>1</sup> Craig has been a Church Health Coach with Outreach Canada and OC Africa for five years. Most of the content in this book has been developed in that context or is used with permission from their Vision Renewal resources.

has also felt discouraged when their growth curve seemed to plateau or shift into decline. It is a situation that most of our churches have faced at one time or another. Those churches that have learned to call upon the Lord for direction and to renew their vision, usually break the gravitational pull of decline and find new ways of engaging the needs of society with the transforming message of Jesus and his love.

The first part of this book tells the story of Pastor John and his struggles in New Life Church. You will experience the feelings of this pastor and his wife as they carry the responsibility for a church in decline. Their situation might seem hopeless until John finds help in Eric. Eric is a slightly older and more experienced pastor who has also experienced many of the knocks that accompany a lifetime of ministry. Eric will develop a coaching relationship with John and help this church to break out of their current slump and to once again become healthy and reproductive as they follow a process of Vision Renewal.

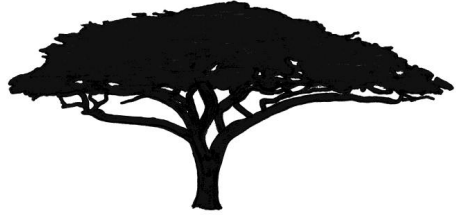
The second section of the book is for those who would rather skip the story and see the main points. In this section I will provide an overview of the principles of Vision Renewal and how you may follow these principles to revitalize the vision and ministry in your church. I have also included samples of all the work that was done in New Life Church. These samples are here for you to see how this church was able to move from point “A” to point “B”.

I hope that you will find this book to be both entertaining and educational.

*On the Path with Christ*

*Craig*





*in the*  
***Church***

**Section 1**



## Chapter 1

# Just another Sunday

---

It was just another ordinary Sunday afternoon, or was it? Pastor John was tired. It had been a busy week with work, counseling, a funeral for one of the young fathers in the congregation, prayer meeting, and of course the Sunday morning sermon. John was always tired on Sunday afternoon, and it felt so good to sit back and relax. A cup of tea and an appointment with the sports channel on T.V. would suit him just fine on this warm afternoon.

It seemed like the whole week built up toward that one big event on Sunday morning. The worship team would want to know in advance what he was preaching on, someone would have to make sure that the hall was clean and that the sound equipment and the chairs were set up in time for the service, ushers had to be confirmed, and a program had to be printed. Now that the church had purchased a digital projector, there was the added expectation that Pastor John would at least have an outline of his sermon available as a PowerPoint presentation for people to follow from the new screen that hung on the front wall of the little hall that served as a sanctuary for Sunday morning worshipers.

*Dear Children, let us not  
love with words or  
tongue but with actions  
and in truth.  
1 John 3:18 NIV*

It was no wonder that John was tired, the constant demand for his time and the strain of trying to provide for the needs of his family while

shepherding the flock that looked to him as their pastor was more work than one man could handle. The thought of having an assistant pastor had entered his mind on many occasions, but how could the church ever afford to hire an assistant when they could barely afford the small salary that they were paying him? He knew that there was no help coming and so he had tried to focus his attention on the things that he could do well. Preaching the Word of God was what had drawn him into pastoral ministry ten years ago and it was still the part of his calling that brought John the most joy. There was nothing to compare with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit is working in you and speaking through you on Sunday morning as you expound the truth of God's word and find creative ways to apply it to the needs of your congregation. John knew that feeling well. He was a great preacher. At least that's what people would tell him as they filed out the door and greeted him each Sunday at the end of the service. He loved being their preacher, and for the most part, they loved having him as their pastor.

Being the pastor of New Life Church had not always been what John had dreamed. He and Lynn had first planted the church with a handful of friends who wanted to see a new church, in their neighbourhood of Blindale, that would teach the Bible and bring about change in the community through the presence of Jesus Christ. Their founding vision was to "Love one another as Christ has loved us." They believed that the answer to the problems in their community would be found as they reached out to one another in love and allowed the love of God to flow through them into their neighbors. They had heard of it happening in other neighbourhoods. A new church would be planted, the people were committed to loving God and loving one another, and as the love began to spread, crime would slowly recede, people seemed happier, neighbourhoods became cleaner, and people started looking out for their neighbors instead of only looking out for themselves. These new churches seemed to be bringing about the kind of transformation that these communities needed. However, starting from scratch in their

neighbourhood proved to be a much greater challenge than John had anticipated.

The initial resistance came as people doubted that Pastor John and his start up team were really in it for the good of the community. Certainly there must be something in it for them, the residents would speculate. They had seen it before; a new preacher would arrive in town and start a church or ministry. He would make all sorts of promises to the people, offering healing and prosperity, but in the end it was only the pastor who prospered.

Gradually over time they began to see the authenticity of Pastor John and his desire to see the community grow and change. The early growth was slow, as people were curious about this new church but not ready to make the sacrifice and commitment that John would preach about on Sundays. This Christianity that he was preaching wasn't just a set of religious rules and privileges, but it was a relationship with God through his Son Jesus Christ. John loved to preach the gospel and share with people how they could know the God who made them and who had a plan for their lives. He would tell how even though we all begin life separated from God and that by our actions and decisions we continue to distance ourselves from our creator. But God cares so much about each of us that He sacrificed his only son to die on a cross to pay the penalty for our sin so that we can once again have a close relationship with him. This new relationship with God brings with it great blessings and privilege along with the responsibility to live for God and to allow His love to permeate us and flow through us into the world where we live.

John had seen the message of the Gospel change lives. Families were brought back together. Young people developed a new sense of respect for their families and the authorities in their lives. People had a renewed sense of hope and purpose in life. God's love was putting a new sparkle in their eyes and the love was contagious. After a few years it seemed like they were seeing new people and families joining the church almost every

week. The church quickly grew out of Pastor John's living room, then his car-port and for a while they would meet in his yard, even spilling out onto the sidewalk in front of his home. Their continued growth required that they find a larger place to hold their services. That is when they signed a lease to secure the use of the local community hall. It was great to have room to stretch and room to grow, but suddenly Pastor John's job description grew from preaching, teaching, and visitation, to include set-up and take-down for Sunday services, more community counseling, regular office hours, and a growing number of requests to conduct weddings and funerals in the community. John remembers thinking that at this rate; they would grow out of the community hall in a couple of years. It was optimistic, but God really seemed to be at work in this little church, and when God's hand is in it, the sky is the limit.

Now in their fifth year at the hall, it seemed sometimes that their best days were behind them. John could remember those early days in the new hall when they would struggle from week to week to make sure that there would be enough chairs to accommodate all of the regulars as well as the visitors who would be anticipated. It was nice not having to worry about such things now. It seemed that these days their biggest concern was making sure that there would be enough volunteers available to keep up with the needs of ushering, Sunday school teachers, nursery workers, and set up crews for Sunday mornings. In fact, twice in the last three months pastor John was the only one who showed up early to set up chairs for the morning service. It was no wonder that John always felt tired by the time he had made it to Sunday afternoon. This was the only time that he could put up his feet and relax without feeling the pressure of trying to be ready for the next Sunday service.

As John put up his feet and took the first sip from his cup of tea, he settled in to the soothing down time of Sunday afternoon. Breaking the brief silence, he heard the familiar ringtone of his cell phone. It was one of those unique ring tones that would always capture everyone's attention. John had not set the ringtone himself, but it had been the handiwork of his

fifteen year old son, Ben. Ben had set the new tone on the phone one evening as his dad was leaving for a meeting with the leadership team from the church. Ben couldn't wait to interrupt his dad in the middle of the meeting with the new ring tone. Just as Ben had expected, it took several rings before his dad realized that it was his phone ringing and he sounded a bit embarrassed when he finally answered the call to hear Ben say, "Hey dad, I just wanted to tell you that I changed the ring tone on your phone". Now, every time the phone rang it brought back warm memories of that Father-Son moment. In their busy lives when it seemed they saw less and less of each other, John was in no hurry to change Ben's ringtone.

The phone rang again and John pulled it from his shirt pocket. Looking at the display he recognized Ray's number. Ray was one of the church elders. John had to take the call. "Pastor, did you notice that Nelson and Eleanor were not at church today?" the elder asked. Then he continued, "This is the third week that they have been away, and this is the fifth family that seems to be slipping through the cracks this year. Pastor, I am starting to worry about our church. There just doesn't seem to be the same kind of life in it that we used to have. We don't have as many visitors as we used to and of the people who do come to visit our services, very few of them are coming back for more. Pastor, I think that we have a problem. Do you think that I should call a meeting with the other elders?" John let the question linger in his mind for a few seconds. This was not the first time that someone had suggested such a trend in the church. In fact, it was just last night that he had discussed such an idea with his wife as they were getting ready for bed. Had the church lost its momentum? Was there something missing in what they were doing? Was it something that he had done or said, or maybe something that he wasn't doing? Were other people thinking the same thing? Were people thinking that it was his fault? What would the elders say if they got together to analyze the situation, would it quickly turn into a performance review of him as their pastor?

A myriad of questions flashed through his mind as he responded to the elder at the other end of the phone connection. "Yes, perhaps we should

get together this week; Thursday evening at seven o'clock would be good for me ..." "Right, I will call the others and we will see you at the church office at seven on Thursday evening. Thanks Pastor," replied the voice on the line.

He paused and held the phone deftly to his ear for a moment. "What is happening? What am I going to do? How can I prepare for Thursday's meeting?" John tucked the phone back into his shirt pocket and returned to his cup of tea, but it didn't taste the same. Somehow the comfort of the moment was lost in a conversation that lasted little more than a minute.

Lynn entered the living room.

"What was that about?" she asked.

Ray placed the telephone receiver back in the cradle. "That went well," he thought to himself. He had wanted to talk to Pastor John about the condition of the church for weeks but he could never muster up enough courage to make the call. It was easy to discuss the problems of the church over a cup of coffee with another elder, and he had been through this very conversation a dozen times with his wife.

"Why was it so hard to pick up the phone and talk to Pastor John and share what he, and others, were beginning to feel about the lack of progress and growth at New Life Church? Everyone could see that the church had stalled in its growth and that they would fall short of their year-end projections both numerically and financially. Surely Pastor John must be able to see that?" Ray thought to himself. The meeting was set and now they would be able to get the issues on the table.

Ray and Cilla had started attending New Life Church soon after John had started holding services in his home. Having grown up in church families, Ray and Cilla were familiar with the religious routine of dressing



up on Sunday morning and heading to church. After some praise and worship and the usual offering, they would endure the sermon and try to listen for something that was relevant to their lives. That had been their experience with church, and nothing seemed to change after they began their married life together ... until they met Pastor John.

Ray could still remember the reluctance that he felt that first Sunday when they responded to the invitation to visit the new church that was located just a couple blocks from their home. He could remember thinking that since the church was close to home; he could get home quickly after the service and wouldn't miss much of the football game. But what Ray and Cilla discovered that first Sunday was more than they expected. The music and worship was satisfactory, but what surprised them was the preaching. Pastor John didn't use a lot of big words and what he had to say was practical. The pastor spoke about how we never have to face our fears or challenges alone. That God loves us so much that he offers to ride out the storms of life with us. God had shown us that love by sending His son Jesus to die on the cross for us. God continues to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" with those who accept Him through the presence of His Holy Spirit. If we accept Christ as our savior, we will never be alone.

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
*Romans 8:35-39*

Those were the words that Ray needed to hear. After several years of marriage, Ray and Cilla were beginning to believe that they would never be

able to have children of their own. They had poured more and more of their time and attention into their work. While they both experienced great success in their occupations, their marriage was suffering.

For the next few months Ray and Cilla spent more and more time with Pastor John and Lynn. They became close friends. Ray and John hit it off right away as they shared a love for the Lord and for football. Cilla found a true friend in Lynn. Lynn was quiet, and almost shy, but Cilla discovered that this pastor's wife knew what life was about and she always seemed to know the right thing to say at the right time. She was the friend that Cilla needed. Lynn was so happy to have a friend that she felt secure with. Ray often thought that if it hadn't been for their friendship at that critical point, He and Cilla would have ended up in different worlds. Ray and Cilla rediscovered their love for God and each other. John and Lynn coached, modeled and showed them what a healthy marriage could look like.

Their early years together in the church were exciting. There were new people and new challenges every week. The newly formed elders committee shared in Pastor John's vision to see the little church grow from his yard into a facility that would give them room to grow. Ray and Cilla brimmed with anticipation when they joined in worship that first Sunday in the community hall. It seemed that every chapter of the church's short history had their finger prints in it. They took an active role in the children's and youth activities. Ray and Lynn had been there for the great days when things were moving fast, and they were still committed to New Life Church today, even though some of the "new life" seemed to be gone and things were slowing down.

As he turned his attention back to the T.V. and the football game that was about to enter the second half, Ray began to wonder if maybe it was time to call for a substitution on the field. After all, even the greatest football players need a break now and then. A good coach always seems to know when to call a player off of the field and send in a replacement. The game was back on and Ray was soon absorbed with the activity on the

screen as he cheered his team from the comfort of his recliner. Would this be the year the Giants would make their big comeback?

Lynn was tired. She too rode along on the emotional highs and lows with her husband as they faced the weekly routines of church work. There was something about Sunday afternoons that Lynn loved. After the morning worship and services were finished she felt like she had her husband back for a few hours. Following lunch and a cup of tea he just seemed to relax and to expose the inner softness that she remembered so well from their early days of marriage. She had grown in her love for John through the years and there was never a question of her commitment to him and to his calling as a pastor, but there were days that she wept inside as she saw how hard he worked and how much emotional baggage he carried in his love and commitment for their congregation. She loved Sunday afternoons; it was her favorite time of the week. It was when she and John finally had time to focus on each other and to set aside the responsibilities of church and congregation for a little while.

After serving tea to John as he relaxed in his favorite chair, Lynn heard John's phone ring. She couldn't really hear what was being said but she caught something about a meeting on Thursday night.

As she came back into the living room with her own cup of tea she asked, "What was that about, John?"

His answer was short, "I am not really sure. Ray just asked if he could call an elders meeting to discuss the condition of the church."

After almost twenty years of marriage, Lynn new from her husband's tone that this wasn't good news. This wasn't just another ordinary Sunday afternoon.



## Chapter 2

# Across Town

---

**A**cross town Eric was also reclining in front of the television. A cold cup of coffee sat beside him along with a half finished tuna sandwich. As usual, Eric had cheered his team through the first half of the football game but succumbed to the desire for an afternoon nap as the game approached half time. The routine was pretty much the same. After preaching at the two morning services at Liberty Bible Church, Eric and Lisa would return home to a lunch of cold sandwiches and a nap, often interrupted by a few minutes of whatever sporting event may be televised. Eric wasn't a great fan, but he enjoyed the competition of a football, golf, or Formula 1 racing event. It gave him a momentary escape from the demands of his own life.

Lisa finished her sandwich and looked over to her sleeping husband. Things had not changed much since they first met. He still fell asleep watching T.V. and she still loved him dearly. Of course not everything was the same either. Time has a way of recording its passing on all of us. His once dark hair was now showing far more grey, and his once lean frame had taken on a rounder, more "comfortable" shape. Eric was the man she had fallen in love with in college and she was still falling in love with him over and over each new day. It was hard to believe that they were coming up on 30 years of married life together. Thirty years of ups and downs.

Something on the T.V. caught her attention. A player was walking off the side of the field. She had missed what had happened but she could see that the player wasn't happy. Had he made a mistake, was he tired, had he

been injured? She wouldn't know, but something about the look on that player's face was familiar.

It came back to her. That was the same look that Eric had on his face when he came home from that elders meeting at the church over 20 years ago. Lisa would never forget that night. Earlier in the evening Lisa had prepared supper and as she was cleaning up, Eric kissed her on the cheek as he headed back to the church for a regularly scheduled elders meeting.

As he stepped out the door he said, "It's a short agenda tonight honey, I should be home early."

She was surprised when after just an hour and a half he was home again. As she went to the door to greet him she saw that look on his face. It was a sort of bewildered, hurt, frustrated, puzzled, injured and forlorn look that she had never seen on him before. Lisa asked what was wrong and she could still hear his answer, "I've been fired."

Those three words still brought emotions when she recalled hearing them. It is hard to imagine how much those three words would affect the rest of their lives. The elders of the church had determined that Eric had led the church as far as he was able to lead them as their pastor. They had felt that if the church was to continue to grow and be one of the leading congregations in the community that they were going to need new, "fresh" leadership. The elders recognized that Eric had been a good pastor, his preaching was relevant and the people were learning and growing, but the church had not grown in numbers in the past two or three years so he became the scape-goat. Just as it had been practiced in the Old Testament, the leaders of the church laid all the problems and blame on Eric and sent him out of their presence.

The next few years were tough as Eric tried a few different jobs. Feeling burned by the church and with a crushed sense of self worth, Eric looked for work outside of the sacred halls of sanctified saints. Sometimes Eric had found non-Christians to be much easier to work with than his Christian

brothers and sisters in the church. For a few months he represented a national book distributor but it required long hours and days away from home. Then there was that job cataloging books at the local library. As much as he loved books, it was like torture to send Eric into a back room by himself to record all of the new books into the library's system; he needed to be with people.

After several other jobs which left Eric feeling unfulfilled, Lisa had encouraged him to reconsider going back to the church. "Maybe things would be different in a new church," she reasoned with him.

She was right. Eric belonged in the church. God had called him as a young man to serve as a shepherd to His flock. As long as Eric ran from the pastorate, he was running away from God. He knew that he had to give it another shot and trust the Lord to insure a better experience.

Eric and Lisa prayed like they had never prayed before. On their knees they offered themselves back to God and cried out for His leading to the right church.

After one of their evening prayer times together the phone rang. As Eric picked up the phone he heard the stranger's voice, "Hello Eric, my name is Tom and I am from Liberty Bible Church. A few of our leadership team were wondering if we could talk to you about our need for a pastor." Tom agreed to meet with three men from LBC the following day for lunch.

Over a light lunch the men shared how they had started LBC a few years earlier. It was still a fairly small church, but with their 30 members they felt that it was time to graduate from volunteer leadership to having their own pastor to lead them. One of the leaders had heard Eric preach at his previous church. When they heard that he was no longer leading a congregation they felt that the Lord might be directing them to Eric as their first official pastor. The presence of God was evident in that meeting as the four men shared from their hearts about what God was doing in their lives

and how they felt God was directing them for their future. Eric felt comfortable with the three men and he agreed to pray about it.

As Eric and Lisa continued to pray about the new opportunity at LBC, they consulted with other close friends. One of Eric's close friends, who was also a pastor, offered some helpful encouragement. He reminded Eric and Lisa that as long as they were seeking the Lord first, God would direct them to the centre of His will. God's leading in their decision would be clear if they were sensitive to *the calling of God in their lives, the counsel of God's Word and respected Christian advisors, and through the confirmation in their own hearts*. "God's leading isn't supposed to be some great mystery that we can never be sure of," he said, "but rather, God lays out a path for our lives and He asks us to follow him in faithful obedience. We may not know where the path will take us a year or two from now, but God gives us enough light to take each new step as we surrender our will to Him."

That is just what Eric and Lisa needed to hear. They had prayed long enough and they felt that the time was right to take another step in faith. They accepted the call to be the pastor of Liberty Bible Church.

Eric stirred in his chair and opened his eyes. As he reached over and tasted the cup of cold coffee that sat beside him he realized that he must have dozed off for a while. The football game was over and he turned his head to see if Lisa was there. Her warm smile greeted him and she informed him, "The Giants pulled it out in the last minute to win the game!"

Eric smiled back at Lisa. She had always been so good to him; he wished that he had more time to spend with her. Sitting together in the same room as he watched a ball game as she did her thing was always great. "What had she been doing?" he wondered. So he asked, "Honey, what were you doing this afternoon?"



“I was just sitting here remembering when we first came to Liberty Bible Church and how it was such a frightening step for us to re-enter pastoral ministry.”

Eric remembered it well and replied, “Yes, those were some challenging days as we were like kids having to learn how to walk and talk and feed ourselves again, but I wouldn’t trade those early days for the world. I think we did some of our best learning in those days when we had to take each step in faith and trust God to lead our path.”

Lisa responded, “It’s almost like my mother knew that those difficult days were coming when she shared a life verse with me at my baptism. The words of Proverbs 3:4-5 had never meant so much to me until those days when we had to set aside our own fears and trust God to direct our path.”

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.*  
Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV)

“Thanks for that reminder, Lisa,” Eric said as he suddenly remembered the call he had received from John earlier in the week.

“John, over at New Life Church asked if they could come and have an evening service in our building so that they could use our Baptismal tank. He says it’s getting a bit cool to use the outdoor community pool. I think I better give him a call.”

As Eric reached for the phone and dialed John’s number, Lisa remembered John and Lynn. It was no surprise to her that they had fallen in love with each other and wanted to be married as soon as Eric was available to perform the service. Their young love for each other was only surpassed by the wonderful love that they had for the Lord Jesus.

Eric had asked Lisa to meet with Lynn as he would meet with John in preparation for their wedding. It was in the days when premarital counseling was still a new idea with some people, but Eric had always

thought it important to make sure that each couple he married had the very best start possible. As they spent time together studying what the Bible had to say about marriage, they would also meet separately so that the men could talk about man things while the ladies could talk about matters that were more endearing to them.

Eric and Lisa came to love John and Lynn in a special way as they got to know them through the premarital counseling sessions. Eric and Lisa often thought of John and Lynn as the children that they never had. After the honeymoon John started helping out with some of the youth activities at Liberty Bible Church and many of the younger girls were drawn toward Lynn's quiet maturity and her playful spirit. It wasn't long before she was leading a Bible study full of young ladies who looked up to her as their role model.

It was an easy decision, a few years later when LBC had a vision of planting a new church on the other side of town, to ask John and Lynn to be part of that church plant. Little did they know that God would give John the vision and passion to be the pastor of that new little family called New Life Church. John's teaching job kept him busy, but not too busy to be able to share his faith with his neighbors and he start inviting them to his home for Bible studies. With Lynn's gift of hospitality and John's strong teaching, it wasn't long before there were too many people to meet in their living room.

Lisa remembered the excitement a few years back when John and Lynn were finally able to move the little church out of their home and into a rented facility. With the added responsibilities of a growing church, John had to resign from teaching at the High School, but the church was able to provide a small salary that would keep his family clothed and fed. Those were exciting days for the church and as the church grew there were more things that just kept getting in the way of their relationship. Lisa was a little embarrassed as she realized that it had been over a year since she had

called or gotten together with Lynn. I'll just have to do something about that, she thought to herself.

Eric hung up the phone and directed his attention back to Lisa. "I am getting together with John on Tuesday for lunch. We can catch up on things and compare our calendars to arrange a date for them to use our tank. I'm glad I called. He said that he had been distracted in the second half of the game and he had missed the Giants' big win! He is a huge Giants fan."



## Chapter 3

# Monday Morning

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**M**onday morning found John and Lynn talking over a cup of coffee. It was one of those slow moving mornings when it takes a couple cups of coffee to really feel like you're awake. John hadn't been sleeping well. Ever since the phone call with Ray he couldn't stop worrying about what would happen on Thursday night. Lynn was concerned. She had never seen John feeling so insecure before. Sure, there were times that he was uncertain about a decision he had made, or times when he felt that a task would require more talent, skill or intellect than he possessed, but he was always able to push through and rise to the occasion. But this time was different. John seemed weighed down by the blame and accusation he felt for the church's lack of growth.

The last year had been the hardest that John had experienced in his ministry. Between the expectations of their leadership core and the expectation of the new families that had made New Life Church their home, John felt like he would never be able to measure up. There were many weeks that he felt like he was just barely surviving. Some weeks he didn't feel like preaching, like his inspiration was drying up. Often, when people would approach him with a problem or challenge in their life that they needed help with, he offered his best counsel while thinking to himself that most of these people would be able to solve their own problems if they would just take the time to talk it out or listen to themselves without bothering him with all of their trivial issues. He

recognized that his heart was hardening to some of the very people that he was called to love and serve. He could see what was happening. John felt powerless toward the onslaught of feelings and emotions that would temporarily cloud his understanding of himself and the people around him. Only God could help him.

John knew that he wasn't alone. He had talked with other pastor friends before about these feelings. Many of them shared how they felt that being a pastor is a hard job because you never really know what is being expected of you. Most pastors didn't have clear job descriptions and usually discovered too late that there was a lot more expected of them than what was stated. There is the expectation that a pastor will always know when a person is in need of a pastoral visit, even when none is requested. There is the expectation that the pastor will somehow know exactly how to get through to a rebellious teenager, even when the teen's parents are being shut out. There is the expectation that if the pastor preaches good sermons, the church will be full on Sundays. The expectation list also demands that the pastor is proficient in all areas of administration, financial management, counseling, teaching, politics, missions, evangelism and even automobile mechanics. How many times John had been asked to help someone from the church that couldn't get their car started? He couldn't remember. But now, John was wrestling with the expectation that he should know why the church is in the state that it is in and why it is not growing faster.

Being Monday, John was relieved to have the day off. This would give him time to think. He had time to think about Thursday's meeting and how he could try to prepare for it. It would give him time to think about the past few years and what had been happening in the church. It would give him time to think about what they had done in the early days of the church that had brought such rapid growth and enthusiasm at New Life Church. It would give him time to think about ...

“John,” Lynn broke the silence, “are you going to take Ben to his coaching session at the pool today?” “Uhh, sure honey,” he replied, “what time does he need to be there?”

“He needs to be at the pool by 3:20 pm and he swims from 3:30 to 5:00. It’s a beautiful day, why don’t you take a book and enjoy the sunshine while he swims,” suggested Lynn. “The summer air would be good for you.”

John didn’t mind taking Ben to his swimming practices anymore. When he first started, John didn’t think that Ben would take his swimming so seriously, but lately he had a dream of swimming scholarships and sponsorships. Ben was motivated and the summer gave him lots of time to be in the pool and to work on his strokes. John had gotten to know a few of the other parents who brought their kids to the pool and most of them were pretty friendly. John enjoyed catching up with the other parents and hearing about their lives, which were often quite different from his own. Then there was the coach. He was quite a character. He certainly knew a lot about swimming, stroke formation, and coaching.

*If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*  
*1 Corinthians  
10:12-13 NIV*

While he could be moody at times, John always found the coach to be quite entertaining to watch. Whether he was mimicking a swimmer's mistake or barking out a cadence to them, the coach was always doing his best to help the swimmers learn. Often with as much dramatic affect as he could muster. In fact, there were many times that John picked up ideas from the coach that helped him in his pastoral ministry.

John remembered the time when he turned from a conversation with another parent to hear the coach yell to the kids, "Sixteen one armed butterflies!" Puzzled by the thought of sixteen butterflies that had been tortured and tossed into the air to try and flutter helplessly, John watched the pool to see what would happen at the sound of this command. Each of the swimmers began swimming a length of the pool, but instead of using the familiar two armed butterfly stroke, the swimmers swam with one arm extended in front of them and used the other arm to do a one armed stroke. They proceeded to do sixteen laps like that.

John asked the coach, "What's with the one armed butterflies?"

The coach then explained how when the kids are training this hard every day, it is not his intention to wear them out on each stroke, but to give them opportunities to feel the water and to practice the rhythm of the stroke without exhausting them. "These kids would be worn out if I made them do this much work with both arms."

John learned that a good coach knows the limitations of his athletes and he does not push them beyond what they are capable of. John felt pretty clever as he was able to use that story the following Sunday morning as an introduction to his sermon on 1 Corinthians 10:12-13. The swimming coach was a great illustration of how God never allows us to face a temptation or trial when he has not already provided a way for us to stand up and get through it. God knows our limitations and he does not allow us to be pushed beyond what we can bear.

John watched as Ben swam back and forth across the pool. He had improved so much in the past year. Private coaching was just what he needed to move from being a recreational swimmer to a real competitor. John thought for a moment about the reservations he had entertained when Ben first began his training. This was an expensive commitment. It would be a terrible waste of money if Ben was not committed to giving it



his best effort. Ben had proven true to his word. He was serious about his swimming and his dedication was now paying off.

The coach gave a few more instructions to a couple of the swimmers and then told them they were finished for the day. As Ben and the other swimmers headed to the locker room to get changed, John approached the coach to discuss Ben's progress. John complimented the coach on how well he was helping Ben. The coach replied, "Ben is doing great, he has been improving steadily all year and I think that he is feeling quite confident now."

John asked, "How do you work with so many different swimmers at the same time when they all have different things that they excel in and other areas where they really need a lot of work?"

The coach answered, "It is really quite simple when you break it down. When a new swimmer comes to me, I watch them swim a couple laps in each discipline and do a quick assessment of what they already know. Sometimes they come with a solid foundation, other kids arrive and I am afraid that I am going to have to jump in and rescue them before they finish the first lap. Once I know what they can do," continued the coach, "then I can fit them into an appropriate group and start to work with the swimmer to help him envision his potential and then we just work out a plan of training and exercises to help strengthen the swimmer to excel to the next level. Then we do it all over again and again. Sometimes it takes a long time with a lot of baby steps along the way, but I have never had a swimmer who couldn't be competitive, unless of course, they didn't want to be."

The coach turned to talk to another parent and John saw Ben emerge from the changing room. As they began walking out to the car, John put his arm across Ben's shoulders and told him he had done well in the pool and that he was proud of the hard work and commitment that he was pouring into his swimming. Ben thought, like most teenagers, "Dad, what's wrong

with you? Get your arm of me! This is a public place and someone might see me.” But he didn’t say anything, somehow he could tell that his dad was having a hard day and that he just needed someone to lean on for a few seconds.

As they drove home, John was quiet. Ben was talking about all sorts of things but it was all lost to John as his mind was still going over the words of the coach. It just seemed so simple; helping a kid learn to swim was almost the same as the management by objectives practices that he had learned so long ago. You just have to set an objective and develop a plan to get to it. It sure seemed easy in the class room. The first few attempts at objective planning in New Life Church had been successful, but after a while it just seemed to be too simple for the complex needs of the church as they continued to grow and expand in their ministry and influence in the community.

At home, Ben started into his homework and Lynn was working on supper. John picked up a book and headed to his favorite chair, but he couldn’t stop thinking about what he had learned from the coach. “Wouldn’t it be great,” he thought to himself, “if there was a place where pastors could go for coaching? If we could just find the right kind of coach who would look at our strengths and weaknesses and then help us develop a strategy to do what we do better.” As he started to day dream about what a pastoring lesson might look like with a good coach, he had an idea. He would find a coach!

Sure there are all sorts of corporate and executive coaches who are experts in helping businesses and organizations work through issues of performance, challenges of transition or to improve strategic effectiveness. But all such experts were way out of the range of what a typical church or pastor could afford. John had heard that those professional corporate coaches often charge more for their service with one client than his church would pay him in an entire year. There had to be someone who could help him out. Someone who would understand what he was going through and

have insight into what he could do to improve his own effectiveness as a pastor.

What John really needed was someone to look into his life and give him some authentic feedback. Obviously, when everyone would file past him on Sunday mornings following the service and tell him how good the service was, they were not sharing the deeper concerns of their hearts. In fact, John could not even remember the last time that someone from the church had approached him with some sort of constructive feedback. Sure, there were lots of people who were quick to share an opinion or to complain if something wasn't just the way they thought it should be, but usually such comments were fairly self centered and revolved more around what the individual wanted rather than what they felt was truly best for the church. John had tried listening intently to every complaint that had come in for a long time but it seemed that for each decision that was made, six or seven people may approach him with a comment and he could be guaranteed, that there would be six or seven different suggestions of how the decision may have been improved based on the perspective of each individual.

John wondered if he would ever get accurate feedback from the congregation. There had been times when he had asked the Elders for their honest feedback about his performance, but it was usually the same. "Pastor, you are doing a great job. Keep up the good work." If he was lucky they might have a suggestion about how he might be able to "spice-up" the service a little bit or a suggestion about how he should make sure that he took some time off so that he didn't burn out. It wasn't the kind of feedback he was looking for. He needed to know how they felt he was doing at his job. He was trying his best to be a good leader, but were the people following. Do the people feel like he honestly cares about them and is he in touch with the struggles of their lives? He needed someone to come and tell him if he had made a mistake or if he was doing something offensive. He needed to know if there were little things that he did that were causing a distraction.

He wondered to himself, "If I were to preach a whole sermon with my zipper down, would anyone say anything?" If he was greeting people at the door with breath so bad that it was altering the prescription of people's glasses or melting their contact lenses right onto their eyes, would anyone feel open enough to offer him a mint? Being a pastor or executive leader can be a lonely position. You may be surrounded by people; many whom you consider good friends, but do they really feel that they can approach you? Sometimes you can feel isolated even when surrounded by a crowd.

"Maybe it's the way we pastors present ourselves to our congregation," John thought. "Maybe we are presenting ourselves to our churches as infallible, unapproachable and intimidating rather than as the ordinary human works-in-progress that we are."

He had become pretty proficient at wearing the pastor's mask. John was good at hiding his weaknesses and failures from others so that they would have no reason to question his leadership and authority in the church. After all, if the pastor were to start telling everyone that he struggled with temptation just like everyone else, and that there were times in his life when he had fallen into embarrassing sin, then how would the congregation ever be able to look up to him as a spiritual leader. If followers of Christ are called to be holy, shouldn't the pastors be the holiest of all? It was an unwritten rule that he had accepted from the beginning of his ministry, but one that he was beginning to measure.

"What would happen?" John thought, "if I were to show up at the meeting on Thursday night and take off my mask? What would happen if I just came in and told the elders that I was tired and I didn't have all the answers? What if I confessed that I was afraid and that the thought of such an inquisition into my ministry was causing me to doubt my suitability to the task? What if I just told them the truth, that I haven't heard a clear voice from God about our current situation and that I've just run out of ideas and suggestions? Well it would sure make it a lot easier for them to suggest that it is time for me to resign. If I could only find a good coach,

someone to share some of my concerns and fears with, someone who could bring an outside perspective to our situation and help me see the things that are clear before me but hidden from my sight by the cataracts of routine, familiarity and expectations.”

John turned his attention to prayer.

“Dear God, please help me remove the blinders that I have fashioned for my own eyes. Help me to see the church through your eyes. Heal my deafness Lord so that I will hear the word you have for us at New Life Church. If I try to lead this church on my own, I will only get them lost. Lord, I am reaching out my hand – will you please take it and lead me down the path of your choosing? I trust you, Lord.”

“Oh, and by the way Lord, would you please find me a coach? Amen.”



## Chapter 4

# Lunch with Eric

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**T**uesday morning was busy as usual. John headed in to the office early and spent some time reading and reflecting on the passage he would preach from on Sunday. John had been in the routine of spending the first part of Tuesday morning reviewing his sermon text for the week. That way he had the whole week to work on the sermon and he would find so many natural illustrations as he just let it simmer in the back of his mind. This week he was beginning a new series on “Finishing Well”. He would do a series of sermons on the subject of leaving a legacy of greatness. For a while he had been concerned about the number of people who call themselves “Christian” and yet whose lives were marred by compromise. Often the legacy they leave is one of doubt and uncertainty regarding the relevance of Jesus Christ in modern society. John wanted to encourage the members of his congregation to not just start well in their spiritual life, but to finish well. He would begin the series by looking at the story of Nehemiah. This famous prophet received a challenge from God to finish a task that others had left undone. It would be a great story to kick off the series as they looked at the difference one man can make, if he is willing to obey God, regardless of the cost.

Part way through chapter six of Nehemiah, John read the words, “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”

John heard his secretary arrive at the little rented office that they shared. It was a small office but the price was right. For the past three years, one of the church members had let the church use the single office in his building. John enjoyed the quiet work space when he had the office to himself, but for the last two years he had learned to share the space with the part time secretary the church had hired to help with answering the phones, scheduling appointments and working on other programs and correspondence for the church. John stood and looked over the portable partition that separated their workspace and greeted Mary. Another of John's sacred Tuesday morning routines was to open the day with prayer and to review any visitor cards from Sunday and to update their calendars with any new appointments or meetings that needed to be put on the church's master calendar.

After praying together, Mary looked to her notes and asked if John had heard back from Eric regarding the upcoming Baptismal service. That's all it took to get John going. "I spoke with Eric on Sunday afternoon and I am having lunch with him today. Can you give me a list of the Sundays that would work best with our calendar, and I will see what fits best with their schedule," he answered. "We also have an elders' meeting here at the office on Thursday night. Will you remind me to rearrange the office and bring out the folding chairs? I also have some sermon titles to give you for the next few Sundays.

I would like you to put the schedule of messages in the program this Sunday."

Mary had stopped writing and was looking up at John. When he stopped speaking she asked, "What's with the impromptu elders' meeting? Didn't you just have one a couple weeks ago?"

John didn't know how to answer. He was trying not to think about the Thursday night inquisition but it wasn't the kind of thing that he could just shake out of his head.



“The elders have called a meeting to discuss the condition of the church. It seems that some people, including some of the elders, feel that the church is not doing as well as they have hoped. So they are called a meeting to discuss the situation.”

Mary looked puzzled, she loved New Life Church and thought things were going great. “I thought we had a great service on Sunday, pastor. Your sermon was inspirational and the praise and worship time was great. I think I even saw a new family there,” encouraged Mary. “They were sitting over on the left side under the big window. There was a middle aged couple with two teen-aged kids, at least they looked like teenagers, but who can tell these days.”

John remembered seeing the family in the congregation as he was preaching, but he didn’t remember seeing them after the service. “That reminds me,” he said, “we forgot to review the visitors’ cards from Sunday.”

Mary explained that she hadn’t forgotten about the visitor’s cards, she just hadn’t received any. “It seems that people don’t want to fill out a card when they visit a church these days,” Mary said. “I think that only one out of every four or five visitors who come to New Life Church fills in a visitor card.”

This was a further confirmation of what John had been thinking. Visitors just seem to come and go and there didn’t seem to be much that he could do to help them stick if they didn’t even fill in a card with their name and phone number. When they had first started in ministry back at Liberty Bible Church, John and Lynn used to enjoy making follow up calls for Pastor Eric to the people who had filled in visitor cards. In fact it was during a scheduled house call to one of the visitors that John and Lynn were first confronted with the idea of planting a church in their neighbourhood.

The family that they had called on made a comment that they had enjoyed visiting Liberty Bible Church at the recommendation of a friend, but they were really looking for a church that was closer to their home so that they could be within walking distance. When a husband and wife are balancing the responsibilities of jobs and families with only one car, it can be pretty tough to get involved in a church that is outside of walking distance from home. That was the night that John and Lynn first prayed about the possibility of planting a church in their own home.

John and Mary carried on with their Tuesday morning meeting and updated the calendar and she reminded him of a few phone calls that he needed to make before he headed off to the lunch meeting with Eric.

As Eric hustled through some Tuesday morning administration, he read through the hand written Greeters Report that had been waiting on top of his desk when he arrived at the office. The greeters had picked up the names and a brief description of one new family that had visited the early service on Sunday, and two single ladies and a newlywed couple that had arrived for the first time at the second service. The report indicated that the greeters had introduced each of the visitors to two other people from the church and made sure that they felt comfortable with the location of toilets, exits, nursery, Sunday school classrooms, etc. Each visitor had received a visitor's package including a brochure, a cd of one of Eric's past sermons, a map of the church facilities, contact information for the pastor and leaders of various ministries in the church, and a fancy gourmet tea bag to enjoy at home as they read through the information about the church. The Greeters Report also had a phone number for the new family and email addresses for the singles and the couple who attended the second service.

Eric made a quick call to the family and left a message on their answering machine saying he was glad that they were able to attend the

service on Sunday and that he hoped that they had enjoyed themselves. He also sent out a quick email note to the others and assured them that they had not been placed on a mailing list, but that he just wanted to welcome them and be available if they had any questions for him.

It seemed like the morning was whistling past. Eric glanced up at the clock and saw that it was almost lunch time. Tuesday mornings always went so quickly, by the time he caught up with all of the administrative things that seem to arise over the weekend, half the day was gone. It was kind of like doing maintenance on the family car. It seemed like a great expense of time and finance to replace things that weren't broken, but he knew that without such maintenance, the car wouldn't last or be dependable. Eric long ago accepted that Tuesdays were just one of those days that always seem to be filled up with unexpected tasks and responsibilities – it was routine maintenance for the church. He was glad to step out the door for a little while and to get away from the office. It would be good to meet with John and catch up on what was happening over at New Life Church. Eric jumped into the car and was off like a shot.

John and Eric pulled into the parking lot at the same time and parked their cars. Shaking hands as they walked toward the entrance of the restaurant, both men were glad to finally have a chance to sit down and catch up on what was going on in each other's lives. They began with the trivial exchanges of greetings and small talk, leading into deeper questions about their families and their churches.

Eric asked, "How is Ben doing? Is he still swimming?"

John went on to share about how Ben had become so committed to swimming and that it had become a big part of his life. John shared how the past year of swimming had come at a great time for Ben as he was going through puberty and his body was growing and changing. John said, "Swimming has helped to keep him grounded, while the rest of his world is surging with the tides of hormones and change around him. One of Ben's

favorite side-effects of swimming was the new muscular tone of his body. Lynn keeps catching him flexing his muscles in front of the mirror when he thinks no one is looking,” added John with a laugh.

Eric laughed along with John. “It’s been a long time since I have wanted to look at myself that closely in the mirror,” he replied. “Time and gravity have a way of pulling all of that youthful muscle down into our middles when we’re not looking.” Both men laughed and reminisced about what it was like to be young and fit and ready to challenge the world. Age and maturity had tempered their youthful zeal and they knew their own limitations in a way young people seem to be oblivious. “It’s too bad that we can’t just ride on that youthful high through the rest of our lives, and somehow avoid the powerful forces of aging and deterioration,” Eric said with a smile.

“And how are things at the church?” Eric asked as they both continued to chuckle about the thought of flexing their muscles in the mirror.

“Things have been better. In fact, that is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Have you ever had times in your ministry when things just seemed to be stalled? When it is like you have hit a wall and don’t know where to turn? Have you ever felt like you just wanted to quit?”

“Yes,” replied Eric, “there are times when things are going great. The pews are full. Sunday school classes are full. We see the fruits of evangelism. People are giving their lives to Jesus and everything is going great. But there are also times when it feels like we have lost our momentum and things are coming to a halt. Those are tough times for a pastor. We often don’t even see it until it’s too late and things are starting to unravel.”

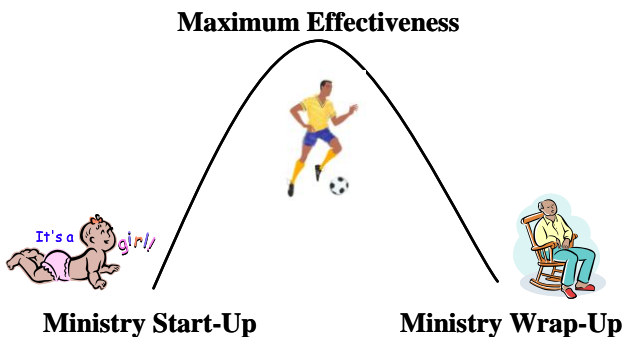
“I think that’s exactly where we are as a church right now,” John said and he continued, “I have been noticing that our growth has really slowed down in the past year or so. Actually, I don’t think we have grown at all in the past 18 months. We just seem to have hit a plateau. At first I thought

that it would be good if things slowed down a bit, it would give us a chance to catch up. But before I knew it, our excitement was ebbing and the church just seemed to be at a stand-still. Now the elders have called a meeting with me to discuss what is going on.” John continued, “I’m not sure what to say to the elders.

I don’t know what caused us to slow down, and I don’t know what to do to get us moving again. I don’t know if I am the problem or if it is something else.”

John paused for a moment and looked across the table at Eric. Eric had taken out a pen and a scrap of paper and was starting to draw a picture. “What are you on to there?” asked John.

Eric continued to sketch out some sort of diagram as he replied, “I am just thinking about how we as human beings have a life cycle that begins at birth, progresses through youth and young adulthood and then ends in death and decay. It is kind of like a bell shaped curve, where we start out very needy and dependant, grow toward our maximum efficiency. Just like Ben is discovering as he looks at himself in the mirror. We become more productive and independent, and then we gradually move into our state of decline until we die. The curve may not look the same for everyone, but it is similar.” “That’s the human lifecycle,” Eric replied, “and once you are on it you can’t get off.”



Eric continued, “Do you think that a church could be tied to a similar life cycle as people? A church is born when it is planted, it grows and matures through time and we both know of churches that have had to close their doors as they were no longer able to carry on the ministries of their youth. Could it be the same?”

John thought for a moment. “Yes, it could be the same in most churches, but certainly this isn’t what the Lord had in mind when he said to Peter, ‘... and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18 NIV)’. Jesus seems to speak of the church as more permanent.”

The two men became engaged in a conversation about how the local church could reflect the permanence that Jesus was referring to, without moving into a state of decline. After a while Eric had an idea. “The reason mankind has not become extinct is that we have the ability to reproduce. Maybe we should be looking at the church as a reproductive organism rather than a static organization.” Eric continued, “By thinking of the church in this way, it’s natural to come to the conclusion that a healthy church is a reproducing church. God has already created a way for our churches to ‘jump the curve’ and remain productive long after they would normally be in a state of decline.”

Eric commented, “I think one of the leading causes of churches slipping into decline instead of becoming reproductive is that we fail to reproduce. We start off well with a great vision of what we hope to become or accomplish as a church but as we start making progress toward that vision, we don’t continue to challenge ourselves to revisit or revise our vision. We are like little kids who just want to be grownups like their parents. The birthdays can’t come fast enough. We become what we wanted to become and then we just stop. We don’t look beyond to the future. We think that once we are over 40, we are over the hill. What are we talking about?”

John nodded his head in agreement and contemplated the sketch that Eric had drawn. That is exactly what they had experienced at New Life Church. They wanted to be a loving body of Christ in their community but they had focused all of their energies on growing and getting into a hall that could accommodate their needs and provide space for future growth. What they had not done was to re-evaluate their vision after they moved into the community hall. They had not challenged themselves to reproduce and the old vision was slowly eroding away and becoming irrelevant. John looked up at Eric, "It sounds like you know what you are talking about. Do you think that you might be able to join us for our meeting on Thursday night to help me explain it to our elders?"

Eric answered, "I am pretty sure that I am available on Thursday night. I would love to come if you think that it would be helpful."

John was just beginning to say, "Yes, it will be very helpful ..." as the waitress arrived with their lunches.

After lunch, both pastors needed to get back to their offices, but they agreed that they would meet at New Life Church's office at about six thirty on Thursday night. John was already starting to feel a bit better about Thursday's meeting. Maybe it wouldn't be an inquisition. Maybe this could even be a turning point for the church if they could learn from their current situation and figure out what it would take for them to jump the curve. Maybe Eric would be willing to coach him through this transitional time of ministry. And maybe he would be willing to coach the church through this time of reflection and planning. Things were looking up!

All through the rest of the day John continued to think about the church. Certainly the Lord must have a better plan for them. The words of Jeremiah came to John:

*"For I know the plans I have for you' declares the LORD,  
'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you  
a hope and future. Then you will call upon me and come and*

*pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' Declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 29:11-14 NIV)*



## Chapter 5

# At the Office

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**M**ary arrived at the office a little bit early on Wednesday. She wanted to make sure that everything was in order before John arrived. She could tell that the elder's meeting was weighing heavily on his mind and she didn't want to add to any of his stress with a backlog of paperwork. She sorted the mail and checked the answering machine to see if there were any messages. She started to work on the program for the Sunday service. That's when John arrived. But unlike the previous day, he had a bounce in his step and a smile on his face. She asked if he was feeling better and he replied that he was feeling inspired.

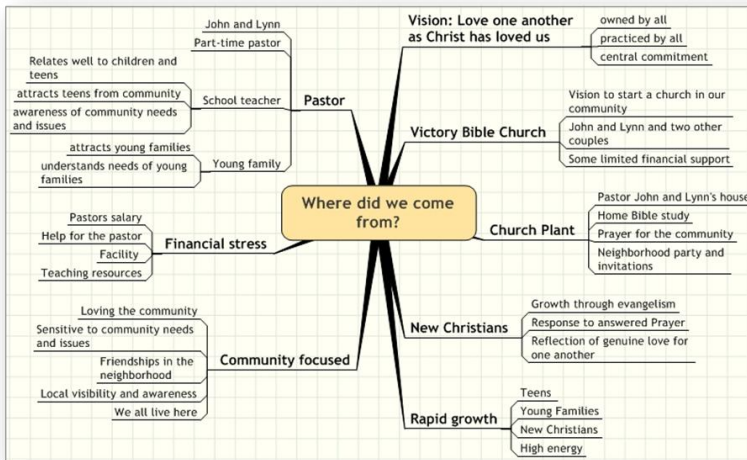
John started to explain: "Last night I went home and was telling Lynn about my lunch with Eric and I started to process some of my thoughts and Ideas. I drew a bell shaped curve on a piece of paper and described to Lynn how, like a human being, many churches have a bell shaped life cycle. It begins with birth, rises to maturity and maximum effectiveness, and then declines until death. I asked Lynn how she would describe New Life Church, or where she would place us on the curve, and she felt that we were probably plateaued somewhere on our way toward maturity. I agreed with her. New Life is a growing church and we still have a lot of room for development and improvement. We just need to get a little push to get us going again. It is like we are in a football game and the coach has just called a time-out to make a quick adjustment to our game so that we can keep going and growing. I feel like I have just stepped off of the field and I am waiting for the coach to call the next play so we get on with things.

Sometimes all we need is a little bit of coaching, some outside perspective, so that we can keep improving and developing our game.”

Mary smiled. She was so relieved to see John feeling more positive today. Another day in the dumps like yesterday would have worn her out. She recognized that as the church secretary she had a very important job to do in the church. She was a communication link between the leadership and the congregation. Mary was an administrative assistant to the pastor. She was a front line counselor for many people who chose to bounce their problems off of her before taking them to the pastor. In addition, she was a sounding board for John when he needed someone to talk with about an upcoming sermon idea, and administrative challenge, a communication breakdown, or whatever. Today she was beginning to see that she was about to play the role of a sounding board as he processed his ideas about the life cycle of the church. “This should be good,” she thought to herself. “I haven’t seen him this passionate about something for quite a while.”

John had not stopped talking. He took out a clean piece of paper and drew a square in the middle. In the square he wrote: “Where did we come from?” John then looked over to Mary and asked, “Can you help me brainstorm about where we have come from as a church? Let’s just write down as many ideas as we can that helped to shape the beginning of New Life Church. They started to talk and each time they came up with a new idea about the birth of the church, they wrote it on the paper. They started to develop a web of connected ideas as they drew out their mind map. John started: “A vision to love one another as Christ has loved us; New Life Church, a vision for a new church in our community,” and the list went on.

Mary added her own suggestions. “Pastor John, you shaped the church just by being you and we started out with a strong commitment to the community.” They continued to share their ideas, and each new Idea helped them to think of several more. They continued to write until they had filled the whole page.

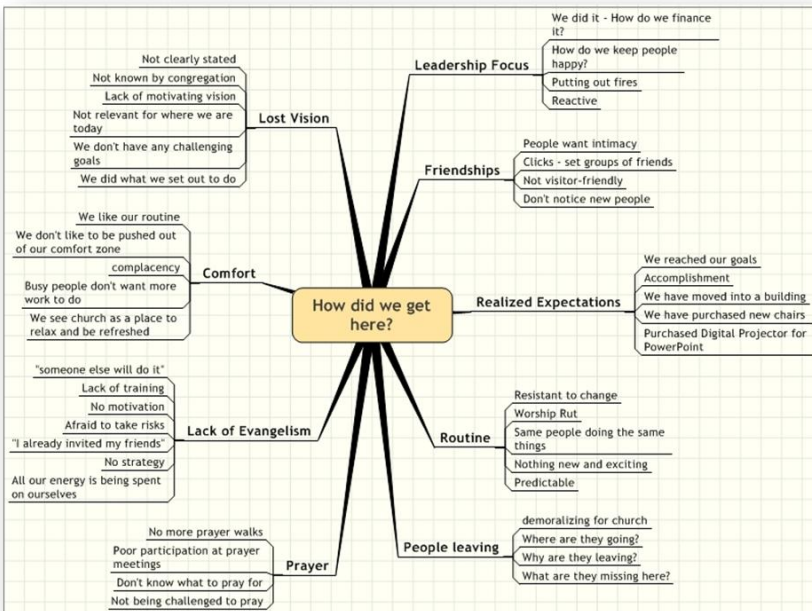


After they had finished this first mind map, John took out a second piece of paper. This time he wrote “How did we get here?” in the center of the page and once again they started to brainstorm and put their ideas on the paper. Each idea they would write down seemed to lead them to several more ideas. John remembered the early years when he was struggling to prepare his lessons for school while working on a sermon and weekly bible studies and prayer meeting. Those were long weeks with late nights he recalled. He often wondered if he would be able to survive while trying to keep up with both jobs at the same time. He often felt like one of those circus performers who spin the plates on poles. He felt like he had so many plates spinning that it was just a matter of time until they started crashing down. It was only the love of a great wife and the commitment of a strong core group at the church that kept him going. When he saw how much they were sacrificing and investing to help the little church get started, it made his own challenges seem so much smaller. They were in this thing together and with the Lord’s help, they would succeed.

John remembered how the church first started. With a handful of friends they walked through their neighbourhood. As they passed each

house they paused briefly while someone would pray for the unknown occupants. This continued until they had walked and prayed their way down every street within half a kilometer of John’s home. “As we grow,” they had planned, “we will continue to expand the radius of our prayer walks and we will start to visit these homes to introduce ourselves.”

The team did a great job for the first couple of years, and they continued to do the prayer walks, but now John couldn’t remember the last time they had organized a prayer walk in the community. He couldn’t remember why they had stopped, but maybe it was something that they should start doing again.



When they had finished the second mind map, John stared at the two pages and smiled. “This is what we need to do as an elders’ team. If I can get them to do the same thing, I am sure that we will come up with even

more ideas and a pretty clear picture of where we are and how we got here,” he said. As he gathered the pages and headed back to his quiet corner behind the short partition that separated his office from Mary’s. “Thanks for your help, Mary,” he said to her across the wall as he sat down to his desk to reflect on what they had written down. Surely, he thought to himself, if they understood where they were coming from, the elders, with the help of Eric, would see that there was hope for NLC if they were willing to put their minds together and look for a solution.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Eric was working on his message for the Wednesday night Bible study. His text was in Exodus 14. His group had been doing a study through the first half of Exodus and how God revealed himself to his people. As he read through chapter 14, as the Egyptian army was closing in on the Israelites on the banks of the sea, he saw something that he had never noticed before. Sure, he had read through the passage many times and had taught on it previously, but something jumped out at him in a new way this time. As he read the complaints of the Israelites as they saw the Egyptians coming for them, he noticed how it wasn’t just fear that drove the people to despair, but the momentary loss of vision. As long as things were going good, they were able to focus on what was ahead, the promised land. But when they met their first adversity, they started to look back on where they had come from. Too much looking back paralyzed them from moving forward. It took a powerful work of God in parting the seas before the Israelites could turn their attention from what was behind them to what was before them. They were experiencing vision erosion. They were suddenly consumed with the past and had temporarily given up on the future and the only thing left to do was to complain to Moses. It was a mistake that they would make many more times in the next forty years as God led them through the wilderness.

Eric started to reflect on the passage in light of his conversation with John the day before. John had shared how some people in the church had

been grumbling to some of the elders about the state of the church. They felt that it was their responsibility to remind the leadership team of better times in the past and that they felt the church was moving away from a brighter past into a darker future.

What Eric had heard John describe seemed like a modern day Exodus experience. God had done some great things to bring New Life Church to where they were today. God had provided courageous and energetic leadership in John and Lynn and He had drawn together a community of believers to bring life and vitality to the church. It was God who had opened the hearts and doors of the community to hear and respond to John's preaching. God had drawn people out of their hiding to come to the church to find hope and peace through a loving relationship with Himself through Jesus, His Son. And it was God who had poured gifts into the little church through the power of His Spirit, to equip those saints for works of service. It was God's church. His hand had been there from the beginning and nothing had changed. The people of NLC had come to the shores of their first Red Sea experience, and instead of looking ahead to what God would do to bring them through it, they were focusing on the past and what they remembered as "the good old days". What they needed was some divine intervention, and a new parting of the sea to help them regain a vision for the future.

*As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? ...It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"*  
*Exodus 14:10-12*

Eric continued to think about John and his church. How would he be able to help them, if the elders were open to it? He sketched out the curved lifecycle again and started to think about how to represent a

healthy church lifecycle. With the image of the Israelites still in his mind he started to think of the continual ups and downs that they faced through those forty years of wandering in the desert. Each time they would lose focus on the future, God would intervene and set them back on track. The vision that was developing in his head was of a circle. The life cycle of the church is more like a circle than a curved line. It should not be limited to a simple start and finish. As the body of Christ it has a more supernatural character that is limitless and everlasting. A circle is a better representation of the lifecycle of a church, Eric decided. He drew a large circle in the middle of a piece of paper.

As Eric looked at the circle he started to think about the development of a healthy church. As he considered all that happens in a church at various times in its growth and maturity, he came up with four essential stages of development which resemble the growth and development of people. As he thought about **the life cycle of a healthy church** and compared it to his church experiences and what he knew about the physical and emotional development of people, Eric started to develop a model.

First, and it seems quite obvious, **a healthy church begins at birth**, *when a new church is planted*. New churches or congregations are similar to newborn babies – they're dependent, they need lots of nurture and support, and they are fragile.

In this initial formation stage churches are focused on the basic, foundational tasks that will build a strong body for the future – just like a young child's personality and capacity for learning are determined before the age of five.

Second, **a healthy church needs to grow**. Growing children are active, curious learners, constantly pushing past boundaries and growing out of their clothes. Churches in the growth phase are also concerned with developing their systems and structures to accommodate and allow for

continued growth and health. Growing churches, again like children, develop greater independence and self-sufficiency.

Primary tasks in the growth stage include formalization of leadership structures, strengthening of systems to assimilate and disciple newcomers, and continuing change to achieve growth (numerical and spiritual).

Third, **healthy churches mobilize their people**. Young adults spend their time preparing themselves for work, career and family and having fun at the same time. Churches in the mobilizing stage are equipping themselves and their people for serving, outreach and future parenthood.

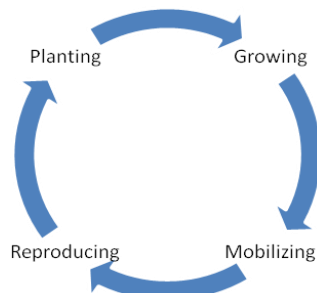
The primary tasks for the church in this stage include ongoing discipleship, empowering of new leaders, multiplication of workers and ministries, and increased focus on areas of giftedness. Vision and direction are enhanced and refined. Teamwork, communication and sharing the workload are critical to success, paralleling the real-world tasks of early adulthood.

The fourth stage of development is what completes the circle.

**A healthy church is a reproducing church.** One of the most joyous times in life for a couple is when they have a baby. Similarly with churches, parent churches are filled with anticipation and excitement to see the vision fulfilled and the life cycle complete as they reproduce themselves in a new church plant.

The main developmental tasks in the reproducing stage – *birthing a spiritual baby* – include identification of a target community, raising up of a planting team, securing of financial and emotional support, and planning for the adjustments of parenthood.

These processes mimic the





preparations for natural birth by the parents of a human baby.

“What New Life Church needs,” Eric reasoned, “is new life!” They need a vision renewal experience like the Israelites had. Something that would allow them to build on the strengths of what God has already done in their past and allow them to develop a new vision for the future. They needed an opportunity to shift their focus from their past, onto their future.

By now Eric had set aside his notes for the evening’s bible study, and he was fully absorbed with the thought of vision renewal. He started to list some of the ways in which a clear vision could help John and the people at New Life Church.

Eric knew how having a clear vision had been a great motivation for the people of his own congregation. In fact, when they first articulated a clear vision to plant a new church on the other side of town, it was that vision that had drawn together those first families who were motivated to go with John and Lynn to start New Life Church. Whenever they had clearly stated their vision, it had always been much easier to motivate people to get involved.

Liberty Bible Church had also noticed that when they kept a clear vision before their people, it reduced frustration among the congregation. People are usually able to endure a little suffering and inconvenience when they know it is for a purpose. After all, we all put up with traffic detours and construction delays knowing that in the end it will be better for everyone and eventually our commute will be shorter.

Having a clear vision also helps to keep ministry priorities straight. It can be so easy to become diverted in ministry, chasing after a lot of good things, but losing sight of the main thing. So many churches get distracted from their true calling because they have become caught up with a lot of other good things that they could get involved in. However, when their resources get spread too thin, it is hard for them to excel in anything.

Eric had also learned through hours of recruiting for various jobs in the church that the best recruiting tool was a clear vision statement. It was much easier to attract people to be involved in something when they could see where it was going and why it was being done. It wasn't hard for Moses to get all of the Israelite people to participate in the Passover celebration in Egypt because they recognized it as part of a bigger story. It was one more step on the path to freedom, and they had already seen God involved in the previous steps. When future challenges would arise, Moses would remind them of how God had delivered them from the hand of their oppressor, and they would work together to do whatever Moses needed them to do.

As he continued to reflect on the list, Eric thought of how helpful the vision statement of the church was when it was time for him to write his

**A Clear vision helps by...**

- *Motivating people to service*
- *Reducing frustration about direction*
- *Keeping ministry priorities straight*
- *Attracting broad based cooperation*
- *Assisting in evaluation*
- *Giving power to persevere*

yearend report. It was easy to look back over the year and measure the progress they had made toward their vision. They had a clearly defined target which enabled them to measure their progress and effectiveness.

The last thing Eric wrote on the list was that a clear vision gives power to persevere. He thought of the Israelites as they were preparing for their final lap around the walls of Jericho. By this time they must have been hot and tired. Nothing had happened on the last dozen laps around the city,

and by now it would have been easy to quit and go back to camp. But the Israelites persevered and made their final trip around the city because they had a clear vision, through Joshua, that God would deliver the city to them.

Armed with his notes, Eric felt that he was now prepared for Thursday night's meeting with the elders at New Life Church. So he let his attention drift back toward his preparations for the evening Bible study.



## Chapter 6

# The Meeting

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**W**hen Thursday evening finally came around, John was feeling like there was now a ray of hope for the church. He and Eric should try to keep the elders focused on the future instead of the past. As John gathered his notes and prepared to go to the Elder's meeting he kissed Lynn on the cheek. "Pray for us," he said as he slipped out the door.

Lynn smiled and replied, "I love you, you will do fine, and I will pray."

As John backed out of the driveway, Lynn watched the car disappear down the street. She knew that John felt prepared for the meeting and she had seen how much more confident he was since his lunch with Eric, but deep down inside she was worried. What if the elders have already made up their minds? What if they are not open to hear what John and Eric have prepared? What if John's optimism is met by a pessimistic attitude of defeat? What if the elders didn't believe that John had what it would take to turn the church around?

She tried not to think about the possibilities but her mind kept taking her back to all of the worst possible scenarios. Lynn knew the elders and she knew their wives. These were all good people who loved the Lord and were passionate about the church, but they were also human. She had seen it before, when good, Bible believing, God fearing Christians would turn nasty. Sometimes it just takes a little bit of conflict or an attack on someone's pride to bring out the old sinful nature.

Lynn remembered back to the time when John had confronted one of the Sunday school teachers regarding an inconsistency which he had observed in the teacher's life. John was concerned that if a student or church member found out that this young teacher was spending late evenings at home alone with his girlfriend, people would automatically jump to conclusions that may or may not be true. Such an example was inconsistent with the message of the church. Upon confrontation, that teacher had become so upset that he was like a wild lion in a cage. Claiming that he had done nothing wrong, the young teacher launched a personal attack against John. This teacher had tried to pick out every character flaw or "appearance of evil" that he could imagine against John. He didn't keep his anger to himself, but for several weeks there were seeds of deception being sown through the rumor mill of the church. It wasn't a big thing, but it sure took its toll on John at the time. Lynn was so relieved when the young teacher decided to leave the church. "What a relief," she thought to herself, "we are better off without that."

*He who dwells in the  
shelter of the Most High  
will rest in the shadow  
of the Almighty ...  
He will call upon me,  
and I will answer him; I  
will be with him in  
trouble, I will deliver  
him and honor him.  
With long life will I  
satisfy him and show  
him my salvation.  
Psalm 91 NIV*

Like most wives, Lynn loved her husband dearly, and she would do anything to protect her husband. She wished that she could be at the meeting right now. She would have a few things to say to those elders, and if one of them launched an attack at her husband she would be ready to come out fighting in his defense.

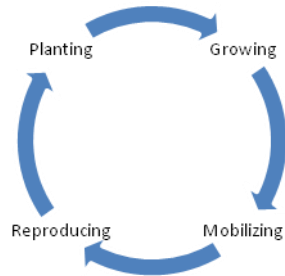
Lynn realized that she was still staring out the window at the empty street. She looked back down to the basin of dishes that she was washing. As her mind wandered she almost washed the finish off of one of the plates. She rinsed the dish and placed it on the drying rack. She

remembered the familiar words of the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm and she knew that it was time to pray. There in the kitchen she got down on her knees and knelt beside the kitchen door.

*“Lord, I can only imagine what John is headed into right now. My heart is hurting for him and I wish that I could be there to protect him, but I know that you are there and I will let you do the protecting tonight. I am glad that you are always on the throne and in control. I know that the elders are all good people. Ray only called this meeting because he and the others want what is best for the church. I am certain that their motivation is pure and I know that they love John. Lord, please allow your spirit to guide the conversation tonight. Help these leaders to stay focused on the challenge and not to get bogged down with personal blame or responsibility. Lord, help them to see the church through your eyes tonight and to be sensitive to what you are doing among us in spite of our own strengths and weaknesses. And Lord, will you please soften my heart. Remove the burden of worry from me tonight and give me peace about this meeting and whatever its outcome may be. In Jesus’ name, amen.”*

John arrived at the office early and Eric was already waiting. They entered together and began comparing notes. John began by showing Eric the mind maps he had done with Mary. He took a few minutes to describe some of the characteristics that were part of the church at its birth and then some of the changes and developments that had taken place through the past ten years. He explained the idea he had while listening to Ben’s swimming coach, how it was important to focus on a specific area for improvement and then to develop a plan to bring about the desired results. John finished by suggesting that what he really thought the church needed was a coach to help them identify their strengths and weaknesses and to have an objective person to help them develop a “training plan” that would get them where they were going.

Eric was also anxious to share what he had been thinking about. He pulled out the piece of paper that he had drawn on when he and John had lunch together. Eric reminded John of the typical church lifecycle that begins at birth, rises through maturity until the church is functioning at peak performance, then moving into a state of decline, that if not checked, will lead to the churches eventual death or the closing of its doors for ministry. It was then that Eric pulled out another piece of paper. This time the sketch was of a circle which was divided into four parts, like four big pieces of pie. Eric shared how as he had been thinking about the church, he was convinced that Christ's intent for the church was for it to be ongoing, reproductive and eternal. It was then that Eric had the idea of the church lifecycle being seen as a circle.



A healthy church grows and develops through stages, but it doesn't have to be a birth to death curve. It can be a circular pattern that continues to repeat itself indefinitely. Eric described the four stages of Planting, Growing, Mobilizing and Reproducing. He emphasized that a healthy church must be a reproducing church.

They were still comparing their notes when the other elders started to arrive. Ray was the first to arrive and his greeting was warm and friendly as he entered the office and sorted his papers at the end of the table where he always sat as the chairman. Themba and Phillip arrived together. Since they were elected to the Elders Board, Themba and Phillip had become almost inseparable. They were close friends and lived in the same neighbourhood. Their kids were of similar ages and they even enjoyed weekend camping trips together.

Grace was the next to arrive. She had been representing the women's ministries on the elders' committee for three years now. As one of the



founding members of New Life Church, she had been there from the beginning. She didn't need to be introduced to Eric. She had been a part of his church for several years before she and her husband had decided to help with the new church plant. Grace immediately walked over to Eric and asked about Lisa and several of her other lady friends who were still at Liberty Bible Church.

Frans was the next to arrive. He was still wearing the suit and tie that were part of the dress code for bank management. Themba commented about how Frans showed up in his "working clothes" and begged him to take off his tie and to get comfortable. Frans complied without argument and removed his jacket and tie. He sat beside John at the table and started to tell John about a young family that had just moved into a house down the street from him. The family was new to town and Frans had greeted them and invited them to come to church this Sunday. He would keep an eye out for them and try to introduce them to John if they showed up.

As each person arrived, Ray welcomed them and introduced them to Pastor Eric from Liberty Bible Church. Ray explained that he and John had invited Eric to come and listen in on the meeting in hopes that Eric might have some suggestions that could help the church to grow and move forward.

Ray looked at his watch and started to call the meeting to order. "We are all here," he said, "except for Felix and William who said that they would be a few minutes late." As he was speaking, Felix rushed through the door. He was still catching his breath as he apologized for being late.

Then Ray said, "As the last man standing, Felix, will you open our meeting in prayer?"

After praying but before Felix could take his seat and get settled, William arrived. William was the youngest and newest member of the elders' committee. William was a bit of an experiment that Ray and John were trying. They wanted to involve more young people in the leadership

of the church. William had just turned twenty. He had a firm faith and he was already being acknowledged as a leader among his peers. John and Ray thought it would be good to bring him onto the elders' committee to introduce a younger perspective and as a means of developing a future leader. So far things were going well. William had not missed a single meeting in over a year and he always had insightful comments to add to the discussion.

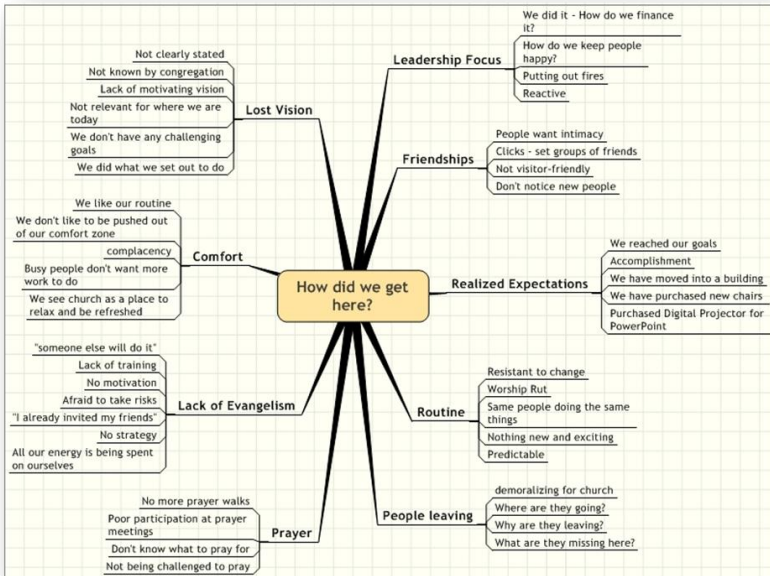
Ray opened the discussion. "I have called this special meeting tonight with just one item on our agenda. I have already spoken with most of you, and we are all aware that our church seems to be standing at a crossroad. It feels like we have been standing here for quite a while. We keep saying that we are ready for the next big step and that the church is poised for growth, but nothing is happening. I have become more concerned about our situation recently as I have noticed that our attendance figures are actually showing a slight decline over the past months. I don't think I know what the problem is and after talking with several of you, we decided that it would be best to put our heads together and see what we can come up with. John, do you have anything to add?"

As he started to speak, waves of relief rushed over John. "At least it didn't start out as an inquisition," he thought.

John shared how he had also observed a downward turn in attendance lately and he was also concerned that the church seemed to be stalled. "We have great people in our church," continued John. "We have depth of character and spiritual insight, but it just doesn't seem to be enough." He commented that there were visitors almost every Sunday, but rarely did those visitors choose to return and make New Life Church their home church.

John shuffled the papers on the table in front of him and decided that this was probably as good a time as any. "Mary and I did some thinking on the subject this week and we came up with this mind map of the things

that seem to be contributing toward our current situation.” John held up the diagram and read the ideas out to the group. Most sat quietly and nodded their heads in agreement. Felix was trying to sketch it out on his own piece of paper, and occasionally someone would have a comment or idea to add.



After spending some time reflecting on each idea and fleshing out some of the ideas with further observations, Ray commented, "It sounds like we are all on the same page here. Something needs to be done and done soon if we want New Life Church to show signs of new life." All at the table agreed.

Ray turned to Pastor Eric who had been sitting quietly and listening attentively to all of the discussion and ideas. "It is good to have you with us tonight, Pastor Eric. You have been pretty quiet so far. Do you have any suggestions for us?"

Eric stood and moved toward the white board on the wall. He had listened to all of the discussion so far and he felt that what he had to say was in line with what had been asked. As he took out a marker he drew a big curve on the white board. At one end of the line he wrote “birth” and at the other end he wrote “death.” He then asked the elders to describe the rise in the middle of the curve.

Themba was the first to speak, “The midpoint must represent middle age.”

Felix added, “I think the high point represents our productivity. It is the stage in life when we have our health and our education and we are able to get the most production out of our lives.”

Grace had been silent up to this point, but then she commented that the high point in the curve would also correspond with fertility and a human’s potential for reproduction.

Eric jumped in at that point. “I think you are all correct in your description and I like what Grace added. I think that the high point in life is when we are at our most productive stage. It is where education, experience, stamina, fitness, fertility and maturity all come together for maximum impact and performance. Then one by one we start to lose some of our stamina, and fitness and physiologically our bodies start to deteriorate.

“Now as you look at the same line, consider where your church is in its lifecycle.” Churches on the growing side tend to show characteristics of:

- not afraid to take risks,
- exceeding their expectations,
- expanding their resources,
- focusing on vision and opportunities,
- gaining momentum,
- being proactive in planning, organization, and structures,
- asking the question “What next?”

Churches on the declining or aging side tend to show characteristics of:

- avoiding risks,
- failing to meet their expectations,
- depleting their resources,
- strong ties to their past successes and traditions,
- showing inertia,
- reactive in planning, organization and structures,
- asking the questions “How, when and who?”

As Eric shared the characteristics, the elders started to think about New Life Church. Several of them had drawn a similar sketch in their notepads and they were taking notes as they reflected on the state of the church.

Eric asked again, “Where would you place your church on that line?”

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, William was the first to speak. He hesitantly offered his opinion, “Our church is still quite young, but based on the characteristics that were shared, it would seem to me that we are on the decline side of the curve.”

Ray was the next to speak and he concurred with William. Felix also agreed that the church had seen better days in the past. As they went around the table, each elder had come to a similar conclusion; the church seemed to be moving past her prime.

Finally it was Phillip who asked the question that was in everyone’s mind, “How could a young church like ours have aged so quickly? How did we move through the curve so fast and without even growing past 250 people?”

Eric attempted to answer Phillip’s question by commenting that with a church or organization, age or size has little to do with where a church is on the graph. It has much more to do with how we are thinking and how we respond to the environment in which we are doing business or

ministry. He shared how a very young church could be showing signs of aging if they started out with a very limited vision and without any specific strategy to challenge them once the vision is reached.

“For instance, if a pastor sets out to plant a church and his goal is to reach a congregation size of not more than one hundred people, what will keep him going once he starts reaching the high 90’s in attendance. It becomes easy to sit back and coast. Soon the church will lose its momentum and enthusiasm. Without another challenge to push them on and give them something to work toward, the congregation will probably fall into a maintenance routine and in time they will move into decline. It will be hard to attract new people to the church because there isn’t much for a new person to get excited about, so the downward slide will continue to pick up inertia and eventually the church will die and close their doors. Similarly, if their initial vision is to be a home cell, what happens when they grow to the point of too many people to meet in the home? The vision needs to be continually reviewed and revised based on the current realities of the church and community.”

“It sounds to me like New Life Church started out with a lot of life, vision, and enthusiasm, but now the congregation has become comfortable where they are. They don’t have a unifying vision to draw them together toward a renewed vision for their community. They have sort of lost track of why the church was planted in the first place and they have become content with their cozy fellowship and the close relationships that they share. New people are possibly seen as a threat to their way of ministry and worship, so they don’t have a strong desire to draw in visitors or to become active in evangelism. The church is truly at a crossroad. One path most likely will lead to a time of comfort that will be short lived as the church begins to struggle in maintenance mode, leading toward decline and death. The other path will involve risk taking and renewed vision, but it is a path that will lead the church toward renewed health, vitality, vision, and growth.”

Then Eric erased the image of the line from the white board and shared his suggestion of a circular lifecycle of a healthy church. As he drew the circular diagram on the board, he explained to them about how the church needs to constantly flow through the stages of **Birthing** new ministry, **Growing** numerically and spiritually, **Mobilizing** people to utilize their spiritual gifts in serving the Lord and His kingdom, and finally to **Reproducing**. Reproduction may take the form of planting a new church or starting a new ministry within the church or on a personal level, it may be as simple as sharing our faith with a friend and seeing them surrender their life to Christ where the cycle can be repeated again.

Eric left the elders with one final question as he returned to his seat, “Has New Life Church completed the task that God has placed her here to do, or is there still more to be done to reach this community with the life changing Gospel of Jesus Christ?”

The question brought a flurry of opinions. Each elder had something to say, but the common theme was that God had much more in store for New Life Church. God had raised them up to this point for a purpose and now they needed to be prepared to take the next steps to fulfill the plan that God had for them.

After a considerable amount of discussion Ray addressed the committee. Summarizing what he had been hearing, he turned to Eric and confessed, “We have accomplished a lot in the past ten years of ministry here, but we have come nowhere near finishing the task. We are committed to do what needs to be done to bring vitality back to our church, but I think we need help. What do you think, John?”

John had shared in the conversation and had embraced the idea of renewing their vision as a church, but he still felt that there were a few pieces missing from the puzzle. “There is only so much that we can do as elders. We are only eight people out of a whole congregation. We can come up with ideas and strategies, but in the end, nothing will change

unless the whole church gets behind it. We need to come up with a plan that will involve more of the congregation. Personal ownership of our vision will be the key to its success or failure. If the congregation owns the vision, they will be engaged and they will help to make it happen. If it is only the vision of the elders, it will fall upon our shoulders to try and bring about change and progress. It would be like trying to lead a navy from a rowboat.”

John turned to Eric and asked the question that had been in the back of his mind since the meeting started. “Eric, you seem to understand where we are as a church and where we need to be going. Would you be willing to help us walk through this time of transformation? Would you be willing to meet with us and coach us through the process as we try to figure out where we are going?”

Ray agreed with John and soon all of the elders were looking to Eric and suggesting they needed him to help them sort the next steps out. Ray commented that by having an outsider help them through this process it would help them to see things that they might be missing or to hear things from the congregation that they may be filtering out without realizing it. Ray suggested that Eric could work closely with John to map out a plan for the church to follow. The elders would be there to support and help in any way that they were needed.

Eric had not answered yet, so John asked again. “Eric, will you coach us through our vision renewal?” Eric said, “Yes, on one condition. This process must begin and end with prayer.”

“If we are going to renew the vision of the church we need to make sure that it is God’s vision for his bride that we are seeking and not just the dreams of some ambitious pastors and elders. We need to call the whole congregation into a season of prayer – prayer for you as leaders, prayer for sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit, prayer for the future of the church, prayer for our community, prayer for me as your coach and prayer



for this whole process, that it will bring honor and glory to God and God alone! We need to discover God's vision and plan for New Life Church. We need to get our feet back on the right path."

On that note the elders broke into a time of prayer. Each one poured out his heart to God and confessed their comfort and complacency. They prayed for the congregation and the community. They prayed for openness among the church family to become united in the process and to be collectively attentive to the Lords leading for the church. As each elder prayed they committed themselves to serve the church through whatever steps it would take to move them forward and see the church become reproductive. Some elders were already dreaming about where the church was going and they prayed that God would open their eyes to see His dream for New Life Church. New Life Church was already beginning to experience new life, and the elders knew that they were at the beginning of something big.

When the meeting finally ended and the elders started heading home, John asked Eric, "Now, what do we do?"

Eric answered, "Let's rest on it for a couple days and touch base next week. How would another Tuesday lunch work for you?"

"That would be great," replied John.

As John drove into the driveway of his home, he noticed a light on inside. Lynn was still waiting up for him. This certainly wasn't the longest meeting in the history of the elders committee, but it had been long enough. Lynn was wide awake with lots of questions. As John entered the house, he had her full attention. "Honey, I've been praying for you," she said. "What happened tonight?"

John sat down in his favorite chair and pulled off his shoes. As he settled back in his seat, he smiled.

“It was a great meeting. I don’t think it could have gone any better than it did. The elders and I are all on the same page and Eric is going to help us out with some decisions and changes that we need to be looking at. I feel so relieved. I got all worked up this week about nothing. I don’t think I’ve been this excited and encouraged about New Life Church since those early days when we were just starting out here in our living room. I’m tired; let’s head to bed and I will tell you all about it.”

## Chapter 7

# The Sermon

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**S**unday morning didn't quite unfold the way John had anticipated. On Tuesday he had been planning a sermon on "Finishing Well" from Nehemiah, but after Thursday night's meeting, Friday's sermon work took John in a whole new direction. As he continued to meditate on the passage for Sunday morning, The Holy Spirit started to formulate something new in his mind and he started to put it on paper. One thought led to another and by the time he was finished, he had a whole new sermon sitting before him.

As the worship team was finishing the final worship song, John stepped up to the pulpit with word from the Lord. He opened his Bible to Nehemiah chapter one and he placed his notes to the right of his opened text. During the final chorus John said a silent prayer and surrendered his tongue, his body, his notes, his thoughts, and his pulpit to the Lord.

John began the sermon ...

"It has been said that the two most powerful words that people are longing to hear are the words, 'I care'. We all long for someone to take a deep interest in our life; to listen to our stories, to look at our photos, to hear our cries, and to genuinely care about who we are. Have you ever noticed how when something happens in your life, you can't wait to tell someone about it, and you assume that they are going to care? Do we really care about what happens to other

people? Do we care about what happens in the world if it does not affect us? Do we really care that 2.9 million people died of AIDS in 2006?<sup>2</sup> That works out to 7,945 people a day, 331 people an hour, or 5.5 people every minute for the whole year. Do we really care about these people or the families that they leave behind? As Christians we know that we are supposed to care about the people around us, but do we? We know that we are supposed to care about what happens in the world and how the church is responding, but when the church is silent on issues of morality, does it even bother us?

One of the greatest testimonies of a Christian life is when someone says “I truly care.”

As we look at a familiar story in the Bible today, we encounter a child of God who really cares. He is simply a cup bearer for King Artaxerxes, but God uses him in a special way. We only read about Nehemiah in the book that bears his name. He is only mentioned once in the book of Ezra, and apart from these two books, the Bible is silent about this courageous young man. And yet, his story is still familiar to most of us.

This story takes place between 446 and 445 BC. Nehemiah was the cup bearer for King Artaxerxes and it was his responsibility to test every drink that was presented to the king to make sure that it was safe for his consumption. He risked his own life for the king many times each day, and he had gained favor with the king. This King Artaxerxes was the king of Persia during the time of the exile of Judah. He

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<sup>2</sup> From UN AIDS “Global Facts and Figures 2006”

was the step son to Queen Esther, and he was a friend of the Israelites. Over the past several years the Kings of Persia had allowed Ezra to lead at least two trips back to Jerusalem to return the exiles to their home. During those trips the returning Israelites rebuilt the temple and their homes and started to bring life back to the city. Several years have gone by and the Israelites like Nehemiah who remained in Persian cities would often wonder how things were back in Jerusalem.

This is where our story begins. Hanani, one of Nehemiah's brothers returned from Judah and Nehemiah started to ask questions about their homeland. While his brother shared stories about his time in Judah, one observation stood out in Nehemiah's mind. His brother said that the people who have returned are in great trouble and disgrace because the wall of Jerusalem had been torn down and the gates had been burned.

Nehemiah tells us that when he heard these things he sat down and wept. For several days he fasted and prayed. Nehemiah cared. Certainly he was not the first person to see or hear that the great walls of Jerusalem were still just piles of rubble. Men and women in Jerusalem must have walked in and out of those walls every day and seen their vulnerability. Were they not worried about their safety? Were they not concerned about the reputation and glory of their great city which God had himself chosen to be their centre of worship? Had they not realize that something wrong? Did they even care?

I am sure that there were many men who passed through the disintegrated walls and wondered when someone was going to get around to fixing them. Surely there were men

who were available to mend the walls but felt that there would be someone else with more experience or knowledge about masonry who would be able to do a better job. Maybe there were people who had fully intended on working on the gates when they had their own homes and businesses back to the way they wanted them. For sure, there were many people who had many excuses for not caring. But Nehemiah wasn't one of them. He was hundreds of miles away when he heard the bad news, but he cared, he prayed, he planned, and he acted.

The story that I would like to share with you today extends through the first 9 chapters of Nehemiah. We won't take the time to read through the whole passage, but I would like to pick up the story in chapter two.

*In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad then you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."*

*I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"*

*The king said to me, "What is it you want?"*

*Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."*

*Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy? And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of the Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.*

*When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammornite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.*

*We went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.*

*By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the broken down walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or*

*officials or any others who would be doing the work. Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.*

*They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.*

*(Nehemiah 2:1-18 NIV)*

As we study this story and the chapters which follow, we discover that Nehemiah had a plan. His plan seems to involve five steps to take him from cupbearer in the King's service, to the dedication of the new walls of Jerusalem just a year later.

The first thing we notice about Nehemiah's plan is in the way that he responded to the news from his brother. He prayed. In Chapter one, when he first heard of the conditions in Jerusalem he sat down, wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. Next Sunday we will come back to this passage and look at the details of Nehemiah's prayer. But a quick glance at this prayer in Nehemiah 1:5-11 demonstrates Nehemiah's faith and understanding of God and his relationship with his chosen people. Beginning with praise and adoration for the great and awesome God of heaven that loves his people and keeps his covenant, he then moves into a time of confession. Confession and intercession become the heart of his prayer as he calls upon God to remember his promise that if the people return to Him and obey his commands, that he would gather the exiles and restore them to the place he has chosen for them. Nehemiah intercedes for the nation of Israel and the People of Judah and petitions God for favor as



he sets out ask the King to send him back to Jerusalem to rebuild it. God heard Nehemiah's prayer.

Nehemiah was in the presence of the King and the King noticed his sadness and wondered if he was ill. He asked Nehemiah what was wrong and again before he spoke, Nehemiah prayed, and then he answered the King. He shared with the King about the situation in Jerusalem and the vision which God had placed upon his heart to go and restore the city. God's Spirit was already responding to Nehemiah's prayer and He touched the King's heart so that it pleased the King to send Nehemiah with his full support.

Following the foundation of prayer, the second step in Nehemiah's plan was to assess the situation in Jerusalem. This would require onsite research on the condition of the city and its walls. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah spent three days discerning what course to follow before informing anyone of his plan. He wisely viewed the terrain in secret and surveyed the southern end of the city, noting the broken and burnt conditions of the wall. I can imagine him riding along the city with a clipboard in one hand and a quill pen in the other as he took notes and made sketches of what had to be done. Not only was he looking at the destruction, but I am sure that he was also evaluating Jerusalem's vulnerability to future attack; the routes that remained open for transporting materials; and even generating a detailed list of what materials would be needed for the reconstruction of each section of wall. It was a slow and detailed process as it took him three days to survey the southern part of the city.

Nehemiah was gathering information about the situation and analyzing his discoveries to make sure that he really

knew what he was up against. Building a wall was probably something he had little experience with, but the more he studied what remained, the clearer the picture became in his own mind. The Holy Spirit breathed His vision into Nehemiah. We can do it, he thought to himself. We can rebuild these walls and restore the glory and splendor of this great city.

After Nehemiah had completed his research, he put together a profile for the Israelites to enable them to understand the situation and need. I think we have a brief glimpse of his profile in 2:17-18 where he says to the people of Jerusalem, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire ... I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.” He reminds them of their vulnerability and the task that was before them but he also interjected a comment about the resources which they had available. God was with them, and the King had sent letters granting access to the forests for timber. The task at hand was great but they had the help of God, the approval of the king, and access to the materials that would be needed for construction.

The next step in Nehemiah’s plan was to challenge the officials with a new vision. “Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” (Neh. 2:17) Nehemiah had received a vision from God and he cast the vision before the people, he also shared his research with them. He shared the challenges of the task but also the support of a mighty God and how He was already supplying for their needs. I can imagine that if we were sitting in on that meeting we would have seen a man who was passionate about the job at hand. We would see a man who had wept

over the state of the city; a man who had fasted and prayed from afar for his brothers and sisters in Jerusalem; a man who had already seen God answer his prayers in relation to the response of King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was a man with a mission and he would not rest until he had accomplished what he had set out to do.

His presentation must have gone very well because the officials had a simple and unified response, “Let us start rebuilding.” (Neh. 2:18)

The final step in Nehemiah’s plan was to mobilize the people of Jerusalem to action. When the officials cast the vision for the people, there must have been tremendous acceptance and ownership because chapter three lists all of the families of people who left their farms and businesses to work on the walls near their homes. Each family took a section near their home and they “worked with all their hearts.”

Certainly there were challenges. There were seven different attempts to stop the work on the Wall (2:19; 4:1-3; 4:7-23; 6:1-4; 6:5-9; 6:10-14; and 6:17-19). Between Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, Noadiah and others, the reconstruction crews faced continual challenges as they set about the task. However, Nehemiah was astute. With each new challenge he prayed and he adjusted the game plan as needed to get the job done, even if it meant recruiting half of the workforce to stand with swords, spears and bows to protect the workers and the city. Nehemiah’s plan was a success.

At this point a leader might say, “Yeah, but we have tried setting a vision but just having a great vision doesn’t mean

that you will accomplish anything.” And he would be right. All of us from time to time fall prey to the same spirit of fear and compromise. In Chapter 5 the people are beginning to grumble. This is something that they had been working to perfection for centuries. They were concerned about food, finances and unfair treatment by their fellow Israelites. They were crying out, “If we do all of this work on the walls, who is going to feed us and take care of our families while we work?” I think what they really wanted was to go home and let someone else do the work for them.

There is something that I have been learning about vision lately. A leader can have a great vision, and it doesn't matter if he is a king, president, prime minister, pastor or a parent. If the people he is leading do not embrace the vision, he will have a constant battle to try to accomplish it on his own. It seems to me that one of the critical factors in the vision of any group or organization is that the people need to own the vision if they are going to work toward its accomplishment.

When a few of us came together over ten years ago to start New Life Church, we had a vision. We wanted to start a church that would embody the loving presence of Jesus Christ right here in our community. Our vision statement was simple; to love one another as Christ has loved us. It was and is a good vision. However, it is a vision that seems to be lost among us these days. We tend to become so busy with our own lives and families that we seldom have the time or energy to do acts of love and kindness in our neighbourhoods. When we started the church we were all committed to doing prayer walks every week. Now it is hard to get a handful of people together to do prayer walks a couple times a year.

I am not sure if we have failed at our vision or if our vision has failed us as a church. Maybe we are just experiencing vision erosion and we no longer see how all that we are doing fits together with our vision. It seems to me that if we are going to move forward as a church, then we need to do it together. We need to rally together around a shared vision. We need a vision that will inspire us and empower us to persevere when obstacles arise.

The elders' team met this week for a special meeting to talk about where we are as a church and where we are heading. Many of us are concerned that our once healthy growing church has plateaued in our growth, or is experiencing a slight decline in our attendance. One of the outcomes of our meeting is that we want to take a serious look at our vision as a church and what we are doing to reach it. I think we will call this a Vision Renewal process. We want to discover what God is doing at New Life Church and what we can do to work with Him. You can expect to hear more from us on this over the next few weeks as we figure out how to get this process going.

I think one of the areas where we have struggled as a church is something we can all relate to personally. We have great ideas but fail when it comes to moving our vision into action. It is like all of those New Year's resolutions that we make and break year after year. We fail to develop an action plan, and here we need to learn from the example of Nehemiah.

In Chapter 5 we see that the people were crying out for help. They were worried about food and finances as they were working on the walls. Many people were mortgaging their homes and fields to survive. The nobles who were

loaning them money were charging exorbitant interest. There was a challenge that threatened the workforce. Ultimately, it threatened the completion of the walls. We learn a lot about good leadership as we examine Nehemiah's response to the people's cries.

First, he heard them. A good leader listens to his followers. He is as interested in their lives, and their personal challenges as he is in their work. Nehemiah knew that if the people were worried about food and finances then they would not be able to devote themselves fully to the job at hand.

When he heard their outcry, Nehemiah was at first angered. He pondered the situation to determine what action was needed. He accused the nobles who were exacting usury against the people. He called a meeting and accused them publicly and called them to repentance.

When we see how Nehemiah jumped into action for the people we see that he remained devoted to the people, to the project, and to God. Nehemiah was a man of action. He heard, he looked, and then he acted.

We, the elders of New Life Church, are devoted to God, to the church, and to each of you as individuals. The vision renewal process that we will embark upon will involve each of you. We want to hear your joys and sorrows, your frustrations and your celebrations. We need to know how the church has served you and how you are serving the church. We need to know how the church is having an impact in our community. You need to help us find out. We do care about the community and we need to show it as we

seek to build love bridges into the homes and hearts of our neighbors.

Nehemiah cared. Nehemiah planned. Nehemiah acted. In the end, Nehemiah praised God. In chapters eight and nine Nehemiah records the worship of the people as they celebrated the completion of the walls in just 52 days. They had accomplished a monumental task in record time, and they gave all the glory to God. Those workers who showed up for worship had experienced the reality that with God all things are possible. They were renewed in their zeal for God and it was reflected in their worship. The people fasted and prayed. They confessed their sins and praised God, singing, “Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.” (Neh. 9:5-6)

I get excited when I think about what God has in store for the future of New Life Church. I know that God is at work here. We have a lot to do to work with him in our homes and neighbourhoods. I know that when we all come together and rally around the shared vision that God will give us that He will bless the work of our hands and multiply His Kingdom. We will be a small part of something big that He will do when we repent and call upon His name.

I can hardly wait for the times of worship that we will share as we celebrate what God has done for us! Will you join me in praying for the glorious future of New Life Church, which is really His church? We need to enter into a season of devoted prayer. Those who can fast should fast. Those who

can pray should pray. Those who can work should work. But together we need to confess our sins to the Lord and intercede on behalf of New Life Church. Ask the Lord to plant his vision in our hearts. Ask him to open our eyes to see what he is doing here that we can be a part of. Ask him to give us a united vision as we seek to complete the great commission starting today.”

With those words John led the congregation into a time of prayer. As the worship team quietly started to hum a chorus, John challenged the people to examine their hearts before God and decide whether they were going to be a part of the future of New Life Church or where they going to be left behind as the church pressed on to new life. Near the close of the prayer he asked, “If you believe that God is going to do something powerful here, do you want to be a part of it?” Finally he asked them, “If you are willing to be a part of the rebuilding of New Life Church, no matter what it costs or how long it takes, will you stand where you are?”

Up to that time John’s eyes had been closed, but as he challenged people to take a stand with him in commitment to the future of the church, he started to hear the shuffling of shoes and loose chairs. He started to open his eyes, and to his amazement, every person in the building had risen to their feet. Some were raising their hands to the Lord in praise. Some had moved into the aisles where they were now kneeling in prayer. As John looked out over the people he saw people who were being moved by the Holy Spirit. They were not looking around at each other, but they were focused on God. Some people had tears in their eyes while others were praying out loud and praising God for the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. John looked over to the front row on his left where Lynn always sat. She was on her knees now as she prayed and wept before the Lord.



The worship team became silent as they too joined into the spontaneous concert of prayer, and John felt tears welling up in his eye as he realized that God had just used him to accomplish something that was far bigger than he had ever dreamed for the morning service. He wept as he realized that the people of New Life Church really did care, and that the future was already looking brighter.

It was several minutes before the worship team started to play a familiar chorus. People started to join in the singing. By now John was overwhelmed. He led the congregation in a final prayer and said that they were dismissed, but if anyone wanted to stay and pray, they were welcome for as long as they needed to.

John went to Lynn and knelt beside her and they prayed together. Recognizing that God was doing something in their presence, they just wanted to take time to praise Him and to thank Him for what he was doing in their own hearts and in the hearts of the whole church. Soon John felt a hand on his shoulder. Lifting and turning his head he expected to see one of the elders, but as he looked up it was into the eyes of his son, Ben. Ben knelt beside his dad and joined his parents in prayer.

After several more minutes had passed, John, Lynn and Ben stood up and started to make their way toward the back of the church where half of the congregation were still hanging around and visiting with each other. Ben turned to his dad and said, "Wow, Dad that was some sermon! Where did that come from?"

John honestly answered his son, "It all came from the Lord Ben. It all came from the Lord."



## Chapter 8

# The Proposal

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Lunch on Tuesday finally came and Eric and John were excited to get together. John couldn't wait to tell Eric about the response to his message on Sunday morning and to share how the whole church seemed to be touched by God and ready to take the next steps. John and Lynn had gone home after church and they felt very encouraged by the Sunday service. Lynn couldn't believe that they had been worrying all week about how the church was going to respond to the current situation, and never had she dreamed that it would go so well.

John made his way into the familiar café and he spotted Eric seated in a corner booth. As he approached the table John noticed that Eric had papers all over the table and it looked like he had been there all morning.

"It's good to see you, John," Eric greeted his friend as he gathered up loose pieces of paper and started to place them neatly in a pile beside him. "I heard that you guys had quite a service on Sunday morning."

John began to describe Sunday's events. He shared about how he felt the Lord leading him to change the direction of his sermon at the last minute and how the message had been so well received by the congregation. John felt the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of the people. He shared how later, at the Sunday evening youth service, the young people were still talking about what had happened at church in the morning. Several unchurched kids had questions for their pastor after they

had heard their friends talk about what had happened and how people were crying and praying after the service.

John was interrupted by the waitress who came to take their orders. She had been hovering for a moment as John was talking but when she heard a break in the conversation she jumped in and asked, “Are you ready to place your order?”

After ordering two coffees, John asked the waitress for a few minutes more with the menu. Eric was anxious to hear more. He asked John about the sermon, “What did you preach on to get the people so stirred up?”

John shared the main points of his sermon, about how Nehemiah cared about the condition of the wall. Nehemiah planned and then he acted. When the wall was finished he worshiped. It was pretty simple. Eric was interested in what John was putting together and he asked for some more detail. So John continued to share about how he introduced the sermon by talking about caring. Eric could relate to it. There were many times when he felt stressed by the needs expressed by people. Eric felt an overwhelming sense that he needed to care about them, but felt guilt when the empathy didn't come some times. Those feelings of guilt led to a renewed effort to love and care for the people God had entrusted to him. Now John was sharing about how Nehemiah had to lead Israel to renew their vision as a nation and people of God.

“I like that,” replied Eric, “‘Vision Renewal’ sounds catchy.”

John went on to describe the five steps that he had discerned in Nehemiah's plan. “Prayer came first, followed by Research and Profiling. Thereafter came the vision casting, followed by a working action plan.”

“Wait right there,” Eric blurted out, “I like that. Let me write it down because I think that you are on to something. What if we were to use these ideas as the guiding principles for vision renewal at New Life Church?”

John wondered, “Could it really be that simple?” He watched as Eric scribbled some notes on a scrap of paper that he had taken from his pocket. He wrote the words “Vision Renewal” at the top and under it he wrote in big capital letters, PRAYER. Eric continued to listen and jot down words as he listened to John describe his gleanings from Nehemiah.

Eric broke in again, “It sounds like Nehemiah had a good strategy or process that he followed to help the people of Jerusalem to finish their wall and restore some of the glory of their city.”

The two pastors thought for a moment and then they had a revelation. Maybe this whole idea of Vision Renewal is as easy as Prayer and A, B, C. John suggested that the “A” could stand for “Assessment”. The first thing that Nehemiah did was to assess the situation in Jerusalem. In order for anyone to refresh or renew their vision for ministry, they would have to begin with assessing their current situation. Proper assessment would inform the rest of the process and be the foundation for doing it well. Nehemiah needed to know the situation in Jerusalem before he could make a proposal to rebuild the walls. He needed to know what their situation was and what needed to be done. By spending time doing a proper assessment of the situation John would be able to have a clear picture of where they were and where they needed to be going.

As they shared their thoughts and experiences, John and Eric realized that most of the churches they knew that were in the declining stage would benefit from some internal investigation. “If we could develop a way of evaluating how we are doing and how healthy we are as a church, then we could monitor our progress more effectively,” John said.

Eric shared, “it is kind of like going to the doctor for a checkup. I may not always like what I hear, but if I listen and do what the doctor tells me, then I have a much better chance of living a long and productive life.”

“So what we need is a check up for the church. Churches need to do periodic SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analyses of where they are,” Eric continued.

Now John had a great idea, “What if we could design a simple evaluation that would enable us to check our vital signs and determine our overall ministry health?”

“Vital signs,” repeated Eric, “let’s see, what could they be? We would have to consider evangelism and discipleship. Those would be critical, along with prayer and service. I think that a health indicator would be how many people in the church are involved in prayer and how many are involved in an area of service.”

“I would like to be able to measure how my church was doing in worship, fellowship and training. Those seem to be really important to the people who attend at New Life Church. So that gives us: Evangelism, Discipleship, Worship, Training, and Fellowship. That’s a pretty good start,” added John.

Eric had just a few more suggestions to finish up the parameters for a ministry fitness check. “We have to look at some of the more practical sides of ministry like planning, organization and programming to make sure that we are meeting the needs of different individuals in the church.”

So, in a matter of just a few minutes of putting their heads together, John and Eric had sketched out the basics of a Ministry Fitness Check to help John do an assessment of his church’s situation. Now all they needed to do was to come up with a survey or some kind of process to allow the people of the church to combine their insights, perceptions and experiences at New Life Church into a single report which would be their church health report.

The waitress was headed back to their table and John realized that he still hadn’t thought about what he would order. He quickly skimmed over

the menu and settled on a burger. As the waitress arrived to take their orders, John asked for a burger and Eric asked for the soup and salad special. The waitress collected their menus and headed for the kitchen to place the order. John commented, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could just provide a menu for people as they arrive on Sunday morning and we could just let them place an order for what they were craving? Everyone would be happy, we would be able to focus the use of our resources, and if we did a great job, people would gladly leave their 10% tip.”

Both men laughed at the 10% tip comment.

“Well, I’m not sure about a menu on Sunday morning,” responded Eric, “but I do think that there is an easier way to do church. If we know what people want and we know what ingredients we have in the refrigerator, then it is not too hard to start throwing things together. If we do a good job on our ministry assessment, then we should have a pretty good idea of what people want, then it is just a matter of finding the ingredients for a nice balanced meal.”

John suggested, “I think we have a pretty good idea where we need to start now. The next thing we need to be looking at is what the assessment is telling us about ourselves and our community.”

Eric replied, “That is when we move on to the second stage in our vision renewal. The ‘Stage B’ in the Vision Renewal process could stand for “Building a Profile”. After we capture an evaluation of where the church is, then we could incorporate that into a Profile of who we are as a church – It would be kind of like a personal inventory or Character Vitae (CV). I don’t think we have ever taken the time to look at who we are as a church with regard to our strengths and weaknesses. It would be great to do some research and determine where we are strong and well gifted and where we just don’t seem to have it together. We could even list the gifts, talents, and abilities of the people in the church as potential resources for ministry! We also need to look at what opportunities lay before the church.

Sometimes we have blinders on and we don't see the opportunities that God has placed right before us.

"And don't forget, we have to look at our threats," added John. "We need to identify the things that are holding us back or hindering us from being all that God wants us to be."

"John, I don't want to create a lot of work for you, but if you could pull together a team to help you, you could really go deep with this profile. You could conduct an archeological dig into your church and your committee and really discover a lot. You could look at the profile of what type of people attend at New Life Church, what their families are like, where they work, what languages they speak, you can even look at where they are involved in the church. But your dig doesn't have to be confined to the church. You could also dig into the community and study the demographics of the area surrounding the church. What types of people live there, how long have they lived there, what are their family structures like, where do they work, what are their needs, what is their opinion of the church, do they attend churches, what do they like to do on the weekend, where do they look for spiritual answers, what is their favorite radio station and more. Depending on how many volunteers you have to help you, you could really go deep and get to know your community.

"Detailed profiles of your church and your community will help guide you to understand what God is doing in your neighbourhood and where you can fit in. Once you know your resources, you can consider them in light of the perceptions and needs of the community and discover new opportunities to build love bridges into the neighbourhood. If the church wants to have an evangelistic and transforming presence in the community, then what better way to start by building bridges to people outside the church by helping them where they really hurt?"

Eric was cut off as the waitress arrived with their meals. The food looked and smelled good, but the pastors didn't want to stop. They were



on a roll and they didn't want to lose their momentum, but hunger prevailed and they set aside their conversation to say grace and attack their meals. All was quiet at the table for a few minutes as the men quickly ate the food that had been prepared, but the silence did not mean that they had stopped thinking. Both of their minds raced as they thought about what might be the best approach for New Life Church, who could John ask to help and dreaming about where this process might be taking them.

John wiped the corner of his mouth with a serviette as he finished his burger and started back into their discussion. "I can see how all of the assessment and profile building will really help us to figure out who we are and where we are going. The climax of the process needs to be the development of a new Vision Statement that will inspire our people and motivate them in their worship and service at New Life Church."

"I know that vision is important," John continued. "I have read about the importance of having a clear vision and that it helps the church with motivating people and reducing frustration. I know that having a good vision helps in setting priorities and attracting the cooperation of more members and newcomers. And I know that without some form of vision, it becomes very difficult to measure or evaluate where you are going or any progress that you are making. It seems to me that this is what we are really lacking. All of the proper research and involvement of our people will help us to set a vision for the church that fits our people and one that we can own as individuals.

Eric finished his lunch and rejoined the conversation, "That's right. I think you are right when you mention the involvement and ownership of your congregation. A vision is probably not very effective if the people don't participate in its development or feel a sense of commitment to it. By involving your congregation, you should be able to insure a good level of ownership by the people."

Eric added, "I have heard, and I believe it is true, that people will forget or lose sight of a church's vision in about 28 days. So when you have developed a new vision for the future of New Life Church, you should think about how you can continue to keep it fresh in front of your people. Having a well planned strategy for communicating your vision may be just as important as all of the work leading up to the development of the vision.

"I hear what you're saying," John agreed, as he turned his face toward the window. His eyes gazed down the little street at all of the shops with their bright signs and logos. "It would be great if we had a nice logo or slogan that we could use to promote the vision of the church and not just our name. We need something that will capture people's attention and have a message at the same time."

Eric asked, "Do you have anyone in your church that is really good at that kind of stuff?"

"I think the best people to talk to are some of our young people who are good with computers and graphics. We have some talented people who probably never thought about using their talent for God," said John.

"Those are the kind of people you should ask to help you. They are not burned out by church stuff and they would probably be very happy to help out if they were asked," Eric suggested. "What do you think a good vision statement would entail?"

John thought for a moment before answering. "I think there needs to be something short like a slogan, but we probably would need to have a longer description of what our full vision entails. I think it would be hard to summarize everything in one small phrase. We might even have a sentence long vision statement with a shorter summarizing slogan as well as a longer description."

"The more variations you have, the more flexibility you will have in communicating it with your congregation and community. You can't always

use a long description, but sometimes a slogan or logo just isn't enough," Eric added.

Just then a solemn look came over John's face. "I remember sitting down and working on a vision statement with our leadership team a couple of years ago. We had some good ideas that we put down on paper and we really felt that it was the right direction for the church, but somehow we never got it moving. It was like we had spent a lot of time building an airplane that never got off the ground. In the end it just became more discouraging to the people who had spent so much time in putting it together.

Eric asked, "In all of that time of building the airplane, did you ever consider where it would take off? All airplanes need a runway. Did your planning include a runway to get the plane into action?"

John smiled as he responded to the clever questioning of his mentor. "No, we never really thought about the runway. We were too focused on the plane. This time we need to develop the airplane and the runway. We need to articulate our vision but also develop an action plan to help get it off the ground.

"Developing an Action Plan' starts with a 'D,'" Eric replied. "It sounds like we have come up with a fourth step in the process. After we do an assessment of the church situation, build profiles of the church and community, and cast a vision, then we need to look at developing an action plan. The best vision statement is still only a dream until it is put into action."

"It is essential that we continue to keep prayer as our priority in the planning stage. As the congregation prays and listens to God's leading,

### *Vision Renewal*

#### **PRAYER**

*A - Assess the church situation*

*B - Build Ministry Profiles*

*C - Cast a Vision*

*D - Develop an Action Plan*

they will remain dependant on God for direction. Fueled by prayer, the action plan can be crafted to guide the church toward to achieving its vision. The action plan should be made up of goal statements and objectives. The goals may be seen as baby steps toward the final vision and the objectives are the specific things that the church will do to take each step or realize each goal.”

John took the last sip of his now cold coffee, “Eric,” he said, “you have been a lifesaver. I don’t know how I would tackle such a project without your help.”

Eric chuckled and replied, “I don’t know if I am a life saver or an anchor at this stage in the game John, but I am sure that we will both do a lot of growing and learning before this is finished.” With that he began to gather up his papers and stow them away neatly in his briefcase.

John pushed himself away from the table and thanked Eric again as he collected his coat and headed for the door. John paused after taking a couple steps toward the door and he turned back to Eric. “When are you available to get together again Eric?”

“Same time and place next week works well for me,” was his reply. They both smiled and nodded in agreement and John continued out to his car.

## Chapter 9

# The Plan

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**A**s Eric left his office and headed for his meeting with John he wondered if he had forgotten anything. Since their meeting last week he had been mapping out a course of action to assist John and New Life Church in their quest for a renewed vision. He had sketched out a rough schedule for the four stages of renewal and he had tried to think about how to obtain maximum participation from within the congregation without diminishing the authority and responsibility of John and his elders. He had settled on a plan that would involve the formation of a “vision team” to guide the process and to carry most of the responsibility. They would see the church through the vision renewal process.

Eric wondered how John would feel about the plan. He didn’t want to sit in the driver’s seat for the church as that was John’s responsibility. If Eric was going to help them out as a coach, he needed to have a good overview of their game plan and the direction of the goal. After all, what kind of coach would ever send a football team onto the field without making sure that they knew which net they were supposed to shoot for?

***Eric's Proposed timeline and schedule of involvement for Vision Renewal***

<b>Vision Renewal Timeline</b>	<b>Assess the Church Situation</b>	<b>Build the Profiles</b>	<b>Cast the Vision</b>	<b>Develop an Action Plan</b>
<b>Meetings</b>				
Vision Team	*	*	*	*
Congregation	*	*	*	*
Concerts of Prayer	*	*		*
<b>Tasks</b>				
Surveys	Church and Community			
Profiles		Church and Community		
Statements			Vision Statement	Goals
				Action Plans
				Ministry Plan

All the way to the coffee shop Eric reviewed the plan in his mind. First, they would need to identify a vision team. They would need five or six people who would be able to dedicate time and attention toward this project over the next few months. These carefully selected volunteers would become the working team that would guide the church through the renewal process. One of the team members would have to serve as the chairman and he was pretty confident that John would want to do that. He would also suggest that they try to recruit people with specific skills to help develop the church and community profiles. They would also need someone with good writing skills who could help them with drafting their vision statement. In order to help the church remain focused in their prayers for vision renewal, it would be ideal to have someone on the team who would serve as a prayer coordinator. He or she would help keep the church aware and praying as the team led them through the process. It would be important, he thought, to have committee of people who are known as producers who would tackle the job and get it done. If they started out with the right team, they could probably work through the whole process in six to eight months.

Arriving at the coffee shop, Eric saw John already seated inside. He waved through the window as he walked through the parking lot. Entering the shop he said a silent prayer in his head, "Lord, New Life Church is your church. All that we do and say today is motivated by our desire to see you glorified through a healthy church. We want to see this church thriving and accomplishing all that you have planned for this year. Dear God, please don't let our ideas or egos get in the way of your Holy Spirit. Help us to listen to you and to follow your direction. Lord, I present this plan to you in an open hand. If it's your desire, then let us be excited about it. If this is not the direction you would have us go, then show us your desire and we will follow it. Amen."

"Eric, it's good to see you, how was your weekend?"

“It was good. We had a guest preacher on Sunday so I had a little more time to think about this whole vision renewal thing. I have some ideas that I would like to bounce off of your head, but before we start, I think that we should pray together.” Eric replied. Then he led them in a prayer. It was pretty much the same as what he had prayed in his mind as he entered the room, but somehow it just felt better to be able to say it out loud with John. When he concluded, John echoed, “Amen!”

“What have you been thinking about?” John could hardly wait to hear what Eric had come up with. It had been a very busy weekend for John as he delivered his second sermon from Nehemiah. Again, following the service there were a number of people who wanted to talk to John and to hear more about his plans for revitalizing the church. John was able to share some of their ideas with a few people who seemed to be excited about what they heard. However, he still felt like he had a good picture in his mind of where they wanted to go, but he still wasn’t sure how they were going to get there.

Ordering their lunch was getting easier. They both smiled at the waitress as she approached the table and they requested the same burgers that they had ordered last week. They also asked for coffee which was poured from a fresh carafe.

Eric started to lay out his proposal for John and the Church. “I won’t be available to meet with you every week, John, so I think it will be important for you to recruit a vision team to work with you for the next few months to help with the ground work and to keep the process moving forward.”

Eric described the type of people that he thought John should approach to serve on the team. As he spoke, John was taking some notes and writing down names of people from the congregation that he thought would be good to approach for the vision team.



“As you begin to recruit your team, it would be helpful if you had some sort of a timeline or schedule so that you can show them exactly what they are committing to,” Eric suggested.

“I was playing with some ideas and a calendar and I came up with a suggestion. If the team were to start working on a ministry assessment right away, it shouldn’t take more than a month to meet with people or survey the congregation and start compiling the results. This would be the first stage as you assess the health of New Life Church. At the same time, a prayer coordinator would be ensuring that the church was praying for the vision team and for the whole vision renewal process. It would be that coordinators job to make sure that the congregation, prayer groups, small groups, Sunday school classes and any other ministry groups were informed about how they could be praying for the renewal process and to be praying for the leaders who are involved.”

“Building the church profile and the community profile might take a little longer as you really want to explore and find out as much information as you can. A church profile coordinator and a community profile coordinator should recruit teams to work with them to gather this information and then pull it together to report back to the vision team. The vision team would then review and refine the profiles to present them to the congregation. This would probably take closer to six or eight weeks for them to do a good job and for the committee to be able to pull it all together to report to the congregation.”

Again John was taking notes and jotting down a few more names. He looked up from his notes and commented, “So far we are up to about ten weeks. How long do you think this might take for us to finish the whole thing?”

“The way I see it,” Eric replied, “if you want to do it well, it will take time and if you want to involve the congregation to maximize their participation and ownership than it will take even more time. I think that the whole process could take anywhere from six months to a year. But that

doesn't seem like a long time when you consider the potential for the church's future."

"I agree," said John, "if it is worth doing, then it is worth doing it well! Let's make sure that we give ourselves enough time to do it well, but not so much time that people might give up for a lack of visible progress. Let's just keep it moving. That is where we may need your help as a coach, to help us keep on track once we set out a timeline."

Eric continued, "I don't think that it should take very long to do the vision casting. If the team has gathered all of the profiles and shared them with the congregation, then the congregation can dream with the committee and let the Lord direct you to his vision for where your church could be in five years' time. Even with congregational participation this shouldn't take more than four weeks to meet with the people, draw up a vision statement and report it back to the congregation for their feedback and acceptance."

"The last stage of developing the action plan might take more time. Here you will need to involve all of your ministry leaders, teachers and volunteers to look at what specific goals and objectives would assist you to realize your vision. More participation at this point means more ownership and a better chance of following through, so I wouldn't want to rush this. If you try and involve everyone and possibly hold a weekend retreat to facilitate planning with your leaders, this might stretch out for three months."

"Stretch out for three months! I thought that the cook was working pretty fast today; at least your burgers are nice and hot." John and Eric looked up at the smiling face of their waitress who had just arrived with their lunches. She served them their meals and offered to warm up their coffee with a refill. "You guys have been coming here a lot lately, is it because of our great food or our charming servers?"

Both pastors laughed and John apologised, “The food is great and of course the servers have been charming. We’re sorry for not noticing your wonderful service and speedy response. We are pastors and sometimes we get so caught up in our own conversations that we drift away in our own little bubble.”

“I thought that Christians were supposed to be the light of the world, not hiding away in little bubbles. You pastors should know that,” she replied with a warm smile as she turned to serve another table.

“She is right,” John admitted. “I guess we pastors are no different than the people in our churches. I hope that somehow our vision and action plan will include something about getting out of our little bubbles and into the world where we are needed. I think that we miss a lot of opportunities to reflect Christ in our communities because we are trapped in our holy bubbles.”

Eric’s response was just as concerned, “We get so used to our life and ministry ‘inside the box’ that we forget to look outside from time to time. In fact, as I think about it, it has been a long time since I have personally sat down and talked with someone from outside of the church. Almost all of my time is spent with our church families or with other pastors like you, John. I guess I am not setting a very good example for my church when I keep preaching for them to go out and be a light in the world.”

John continued, “The only real opportunity that I seem to get to mix with non-Christians or non-church people is when I go to the pool with Ben and visit with the parents of the other swimmers. Maybe this could be something that we could work on together. Why don’t we set a goal of getting ourselves out of the box this year? We could be setting a better example to our congregations.”

“That’s a great idea,” Eric replied. “I have been thinking that I should find something to do in the community that would give me more

opportunities to mix with non-churched people and develop new relationships with people outside the church who need to meet Jesus. I just never seem to get around to it. There is always so much to do and so little time. Let's try and hold each other accountable on this one, OK?"

As they ate their lunches, John and Eric continued to talk about the vision renewal plan and how they would get it started. Finding the right people to help guide the process would be the first priority. This was going to be a big responsibility and more than John would be able to do by himself. They would also have to look outside of their current leadership network and try to find people who would be able to commit the appropriate amount of time and attention to ensure that the job was done well.

By the time they finished their lunches they had drawn out a tentative schedule for the next six months. John had a list of people that he would approach to be on the vision team. Eric had made a commitment to meet with John and the team once a month to help keep them on track and to provide some coaching as they went through the provisioning process.

As the men concluded their time together they closed with a word of prayer and returned to their offices. John had never felt so positive about the future of New Life Church. He was feeling refreshed and revitalized with new hope and he knew that the church would soon live up to its name as they began to be revitalized together.

Back at the office John continued to work on the schedule that he and Eric had sketched out over lunch. He tried to put some actual dates into the schedule and plotted some suggested meeting times with the vision team and the church elders. He included times to meet with the whole congregation and specific points in the process for concerts of prayer. Next he would begin to develop a sermon series around the themes of vision, renewal and a healthy church. He would continue to develop these themes from Nehemiah, but considered expanding it to include some of Paul's

work with the early church or maybe a look at the seven churches in Revelation. That would provide a great study on some of the dynamics of healthy and unhealthy churches.

Time flew and soon it was time to head home for supper. John couldn't wait to share the day's developments with Lynn. As they talked about the vision team and who they thought would be good to have on the team, Lynn suggested that they should ask Ray to be a part of it. Perhaps he would be willing to be the chairman?

They agreed that Ray would be a great chairman for the team if he had the time to commit to it. They decided to ask him right away. Following dinner with Ben and a quick review of the day's events and helping him with a question he had about his homework, John and Lynn told Ben that they were going to drop by Ray and Cilla's house for a visit.

Ben nodded and replied, "Don't worry; I won't wait up for you." What more could they expect from a teenager!

It was just a short walk over to Ray and Cilla's place and the cool evening air smelled fresh and clean. John and Lynn talked some more about their plans for the year ahead of them and what they hoped that this vision renewal process would accomplish for them in the church. As they approached Ray and Cilla's they called from the front steps to see if anyone was home. Cilla opened the door almost immediately and smiled to her visitors.

"What brings you to our home this evening? Did your car break down?"

"No," replied Lynn, "we just thought we would stop by and see if you guys were open for a visit. Since it is such a beautiful evening, we decided to walk and enjoy the air."

"Please come in, I will warm up the kettle and call Ray. He is sitting on the back steps reading a book." Lynn held the screen door open as she

welcomed John and Lynn and invited them to have a seat in the front room. Then as she returned to the kitchen she called, “Ray! We have company, do you think you can draw yourself away from your book?”

In a moment Ray had joined them in the room and took a seat across from John and Lynn. “Hey, it’s great to see you tonight! What brings you this way?”

John shared about his day and the meeting he had with Eric. Ray was very interested in the progress that was being made toward their renewal progress and he kept firing questions back at John.

“How long do you think it will take to get the church turned around?”

“Have you thought about how many people it would take to make up this vision team?”

“Will Eric be available to help us along the way?”

“Have you thought about what you hope to accomplish through this whole process?”

They were good questions and John did his best to answer each one. Lynn helped out from time to time with thoughts that she wanted to share and some of the ideas that she had about where this might take the church.

Cilla arrived with tea and biscuits and joined in the conversation and had a few of her own questions.

It was a feeling of excitement and anticipation that filled the little room as they shared some of their anticipations and ideas. Vision renewal was bringing hope back to their little church and along with that hope was a renewed passion and desire to be a part of what God was about to do in New Life Church.

It didn't take any persuasion when John finally asked Ray if he would be willing to give leadership to the vision team by acting as the chairman. John and Lynn shared that they felt that Ray would be the best man for the job. He was well respected in the church and he had a great ability to lead and get things done. He would be the perfect person to help John recruit the rest of the team and work with them to accomplish the task at hand. John shared the proposed timeline that he had been working on and asked if Ray would pray about it.

"There is no need for any more prayer on this matter," Ray replied. "Cilla and I have already been talking and praying about our involvement in New Life Church and we are committed to the church and her future. We have already decided that we will be willing to do whatever the Lord calls us to do to help and I feel confident that your visit tonight is like a message from the Lord. I am here to help in any way that I can. If you would like me to chair this team, then I am willing and excited to do it."

As they continued to share some of their hopes and aspirations for the church, all four adults couldn't help but feel like old times when they were just starting the church. There were lots of these little impromptu meetings back in those early days. If they looked carefully at the floor, they could still see some of the wear marks in the carpet that came from some of their early prayer meetings together.

Before they set out to walk back home, John led a time of prayer and Ray agreed to meet with John on Saturday to start contacting the remaining members who they had selected for the vision team. Cilla and Lynn caught up on a bit of family news while the men made a few quick notes and listed the people who they would contact on Saturday.

They had just taken the next big step down the path toward a renewed New Life Church.





## Chapter 10

# The Results

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**O**ne year later ...

John woke up to the sound of the birds outside his window. The sun was just rising and it was time to start another day. After his morning study time and breakfast with Lynn and Ben, he would be off to the office. Today John was bouncing through his morning routine with more energy than usual. There was a spring in his step and radiance in his character that was refreshing to Lynn. It reminded her of their early years together and of the excitement they shared as they were just starting out in ministry.

The past year had not been a walk in the park, but as they worked through the renewal of their vision, they had become rejuvenated in their ministry and in their spiritual lives. Taking the time to listen to the congregation had been tough, there were times when John struggled to understand what people were trying to say and he didn't always agree with their perceptions of the church. However, as they took the time to work through it, they all came to appreciate one another more and to understand who they were as a church. Compelled by the belief that God had brought them together at New Life Church for a purpose, the people had initiated a new prayer movement in the church. As the people prayed, God answered. Looking back over the past year of vision renewal it was easy to see where God had intervened and led the church to discover the

purpose that He had for her. Now they had their feet on the right path. New Life Church was off and running. It was hard to imagine that this was the same church that was stagnated just a year ago. Struggling to find their place in the community was part of their past. Today they were a new church. Their newfound love for the people surrounding them had become the new heartbeat of their ministry. The future looks bright.

Lynn asked her husband, “You seem to be in an awfully good mood this morning. What’s going on?”

Without a pause John replied, “Do you realize that this week marks a full year since I received that phone call from Ray asking me to come for a special meeting with the leadership team? One full year since I thought it was all over here and that my ministry was drawing to an end? It is hard to believe what God has done in the space of these past twelve months. I am meeting with Ray for coffee this morning and to finalize some of their plans for the church plant. He and Cilla are so excited about the group they started through their business and they really want to see it be the beginning of a new church.”

“What time are you meeting with him? I would sure like to come along if Cilla is available.”

John made a quick call to Ray and in a few minutes both of the men were on their way along with their wives. They met in the same coffee shop where John had met with Eric and where they had come up with the idea for renewing the vision of their church. It was a place with warm memories and the familiar smell of fresh coffee. John and Lynn were first to arrive and John led Lynn to his favorite table in the corner. It was one with a view out over the parking lot. They ordered two coffees and started to talk about the miraculous transformation that had taken place in New Life Church this year.

Lynn remembered the night that John went to meet with the elders. She was so concerned for him and so afraid of the damage that would be done if the elders placed all of the responsibility on him for the church being plateaued in its growth. She wept and prayed for him that night. Lynn was so filled with joy when he came home with good news and a developing plan that could help the church to rediscover who she was and what she was there for. This vision renewal idea sounded like it just might work.

Ray and Cilla arrived and joined John and Lynn at the table. Immediately they were deeply involved in two conversations. Ray and John were talking about their plans for the new church plant while Cilla was asking about Ben and Lynn filled her in on all the latest happenings in their family.

Asking Ray to chair the vision team for New Life Church was probably one of the best things John could do for the church and for Ray. The vision team had done such an outstanding job under his leadership. As they assessed the situation of the church they were affirmed for a lot of things that the church had done well, but they also learned a lot about where they were not measuring up to people's expectations. The congregation was not growing and everyone was concerned about it, but no one felt like they could do anything to improve the situation. Building a profile of their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats had helped them to see how God had situated them with some special gifts and abilities that made them unique among the other Christian churches in the area. As they looked at their community they saw that there were some pretty serious needs that were not being addressed by anyone. They had a significant role to play in the community and they were feeling up to the challenge. Through their committed season of prayer for vision renewal they knew that the Lord had led them to their new vision of "Growing Deeper – Spreading Farther." The congregation had rallied around this new vision and almost everyone had an active role to play in their action plan. Who

would have ever dreamed that one of the action items would have been to plant a daughter church?

Recognizing that there were so many people in the community who had grown up in church, but were no longer attending one of the many stained glass monuments that dotted their local map and decorated many of their busy intersections, Ray and Cilla felt the Lord calling them to start a new church in their home. This would be a place for real people to discover Jesus Christ and develop an authentic relationship with him. Their desire would be to start by inviting their friends and the people who worked in their small business. As they shared Christ and hoped to disciple new believers, they knew that God was leading them into one of the most exciting challenges of their lives.

“So, how have the responses been to your invitations?” John asked. “I think that you were going to invite some of your employees to come to your Bible study last week, weren’t you?”

“Yes, and I did,” replied Ray. “I asked three more of our employees this past week and two of them came and one brought her boyfriend. Leading a Bible study with a group where the majority isn’t what we would call “Christian” has been challenging and different. Most of the people we are inviting have had some church experience in their lives. A few attended a Sunday school class when they were a child. However, most of them have not been through the doors of a church in the last 10 years unless it was for a wedding or funeral.”

“How is it going? Do you feel like they are interested in sticking it out with you?” John asked.

“It is very clear that these people have a deep spiritual hunger. They have tried to fill the void in many different ways and most of them seem very interested in discovering Jesus all over again. Time will tell, but I think that most of them will stick it out. Cilla has a couple of friends that she

invited yesterday when she was at the mall. They said that they were interested in coming and since we meet on Sunday evening, it looked like the time was good for them. At this rate, I may have to find a few more chairs for our living room. Last week we had twelve people and we now have to move in all the chairs from our kitchen to be able to seat everyone.”

“Well, that’s a great problem to have. I was wondering if you would be able to share a testimony on Sunday morning about how things are going so that the church can be reminded to be praying for you and for our new baby church.” John asked.

“I would love to! There is so much to share; I am not sure how much to tell.”

“Well,” John replied, “I will give you from five to ten minutes to share some of the highlights. Will that be enough time?”

“Yes, that will be plenty of time.”

The ladies had been hearing bits of the men’s conversation and at this point Cilla jumped into the conversation.

“Ray, do you think that Precious would be willing to come with us on Sunday morning and share what God has been doing in her life?” Cilla asked.

“That’s a great idea, Cil,” commented Ray. “I think she is ready to share and that her story is probably one of the most exciting things that we could share.”

“Precious lost her husband three years ago. It was very tragic. They were newlyweds and Precious was eight months pregnant when her husband was killed in a car accident. She was contemplating suicide and was actually just waiting to find the right person to look after her little son

before she took her life. She came to me as her employer a few months ago and was asking some strange questions about what would happen to her son if she died. She did not have any close relatives in the area and no one that she had really been in contact with for several years. She started to ask if Cilla and I would look after him if anything ever happened to her. We met with her a couple times and said that we would be willing to look after her son if something ever happened and then she burst into tears. After Cilla held her for a while and told her that we loved her and that we were sure that nothing was going to happen to her, she started to open up to us about her plan to kill herself.”

“She couldn’t live with her grief any longer and she felt so alone. We weren’t sure what to do so we invited her to bring her son and to spend the weekend with us. She came and we just tried to make her feel like part of our family. We tried to love her and let her experience the warmth of a family that cared for her. We didn’t want to pressure her, but when she heard that we were having a Bible study at our house on Sunday night, she asked if she could join us.”

*“I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.”*  
Acts 2:25-28

“After a quick supper on Sunday evening we set up for the Bible study and Precious helped us to make tea and biscuits to serve. She joined us as we were up to chapter 2 in our study of Acts. When we read David’s song in vs. 25-28, she began to weep. After the study Cilla and I sat up with her and shared the hope that is ours when we choose the path that God has made for us. It was so exciting, because she wanted to learn more. We

took her to Romans 3:23 and 6:23 and we shared what Jesus promised in John 3:16, and Precious said, “I want to follow Jesus and discover the path he has for my life.” We prayed with her as she confessed her sin and asked the Lord for forgiveness and committed to follow Him for the rest of her life, wherever that may take her. Cilla has been doing a basic discipleship study with her each week and she is growing and telling people about the difference that God has made in her life. Everything about Precious is changing and some of the other people at our office have started to ask questions. I think that the changes in her life are the reason why several of the new people have started coming to our little group. I doubt whether Precious would have come to church if we had invited her, but she responded to authentic Christian love in the comfort of a friend’s home.”

John and Lynn were so excited and Lynn had tears in her eyes. She had heard this story already from Cilla and was praying for Cilla as the discipleship study was beginning with Precious. John said, “That is awesome. Will you please ask her if she will share some of her story with us on Sunday? That is the kind of story that we all need to hear to remind us how God can use us if we make ourselves available. You guys are doing a great job, we are so proud of you and I am glad that we can celebrate this new spiritual birth with you.”

John continued, “It looks like we are really becoming a healthy and reproductive church. Not only have we started a new cell group/house church, but we have also witnessed the birth of a new babe in Christ. I am glad that the Lord led us through the renewal of our vision. Eric’s coaching has meant so much to me personally and I know that he was a great help to the vision team. I hope that you will tell him about Precious and how the Lord is starting to move in our church and through your new group. Eric will be so excited to hear about Precious’s story. In a sense she is like a spiritual granddaughter of Liberty Bible Church.”

All through their meal, the two couples shared stories and conversations from the past weeks. There was so much going on in their

lives and in the life of the church it was hard to keep up with all of it. As part of his commitment with Eric, John had volunteered to be the secretary for the local swimming team. It didn't require a lot of time, but it gave him a reason to be more involved in Ben's swimming and of course it gave him lots of opportunities to get to know people outside of the church.

The church was already seeing signs of growth. The congregation was excited about their new logo and vision statement. "Growing Deeper – Spreading Farther" was a simplified slogan that summed up their longer vision statement which was: "Growing in faith to present Christ to the world through our words and our actions." The attendance was up in the Sunday worship service and in Sunday school. In addition to Ray and Cilla's new cell group, two other groups were getting ready to start. The church saw these three new cells as part of their strategy to spread farther. The hope was that each of these groups would become the nucleus for a new daughter church. They wanted to see the community of Blindale saturated with new churches that were relevant and unintimidating.

As they were finishing their lunch together and getting ready to leave, John heard a familiar sound. It was his cell phone and it was still ringing with that same ringtone that Ben had put on it over a year ago. John smiled as he pulled it out of his pocket. He didn't recognize the number in the display, but he pressed the button to answer the call.

"Hello, this is Pastor John."

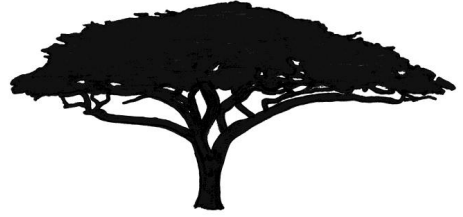
"Hi John, my name is Andre. I am the pastor at Blindale Evangelical Church. One of my elders told me that your church just went through something called vision renewal. We are struggling with a few things over here at B.E.C. and I wondered if you would be available to sit down some time and tell me about what you did? I think that what you did would be very helpful for us. Would you be available to get together some time? I am willing to buy lunch."



John smiled as he responded. "I would love to tell you about what we did and how it has helped us. Can I call you right back, I am just finishing a meeting?"

As John said good-bye to Andre he turned to Ray and Cilla. "It sounds like the word is getting around about our vision renewal. That was just another local pastor who would like to sit down and talk about the process we took to rediscover the path that God has for our church. Ray, I may be calling you and Eric for a little more help."





*in the*  
***Church***

**Section 2**



## Chapter 11

# Introduction to *Vision Renewal*<sup>3</sup>

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**O**urs must be a generation of Vision!

One of the greatest challenges facing the Church today is keeping the vision for ministry fresh. Regardless of the age of the church, it is possible to lose sight of the vision once the initial goals have been reached. There are an increasing number of ageing churches that have served well in fulfilling the Great Commission, but are now in a state of decline and facing closure. Similarly, there are many young churches which started well, but have failed to become healthy and reproductive. For most of them it was the lack of a clear vision or the lack of reviewing their vision on a regular basis that led to their decline or plateau. They missed the importance of understanding the changing culture and the renewing of their vision. This left them in the position of not being relevant for today.

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<sup>3</sup> *Vision Renewal* is created and copywrited by Outreach Canada Ministries, Inc. Portions of this chapter have been taken from the VISION RENEWAL Manual, copyright 2001 by Outreach Canada Ministries, Inc., used by permission of the publisher, Church Leadership Library. VISION RENEWAL is a manual that will guide a church through 32 weeks of renewal. The manual follows a week by week approach and can be used to lead you through the four stages of Vision Renewal. For more information see: [www.outreach.ca](http://www.outreach.ca)

This manual is an attempt to assist the local church in listening to God concerning themselves, their community, and their future ministry. It takes the church step by step through a process that leads to a greater understanding in each of these areas. It is divided into four phases: Assess the Church situation, Build the Profiles, Cast the Vision and Develop an Action Plan. This process involves prayer, careful listening to God and his development of strategic action plans.

This manual will not tell you what you need to become as a church, but it will lead you in a discovery process to where you will understand very clearly what God is calling you to become as a church. The process is one that needs repeating at least every five years, to incorporate new members and assist all in the ownership of the vision.

*Vision Renewal* is a manual for listening to God's direction through his word and his church. It is a Spirit-led, whole-church process that involves lay people and leaders in discovering God's vision and developing realistic, detailed plans that the whole church owns. Communication is integral to the whole process.

Many churches struggle with an unclear vision for ministry. Consequently they lack focus and effectiveness in their overall ministry and do not achieve maximum impact on their communities. In an effort to remedy their situation they often try to create a vision rather than discovering the one that God has for them. *Vision Renewal* offers a way for churches to listen to God collectively and discover his agenda and the future he has for them. The result is a focused church with a realistic vision that makes a maximum kingdom impact. *Vision Renewal* guides the church to a discovery of God's vision for them by:

- calling them to pray for God's direction and leading,
- providing a congregational forum for the entire church to participate in recognizing God's leading,

- discovering and facing the truth about themselves and their community,
- developing practical ways to accomplish the goals God has given and
- translating their plan into ministry.

### **The Importance of Vision**

*“In every one of the growing, healthy churches I have studied, there is a discernible link between the spiritual and numerical growth of those congregations and the existence, articulation and widespread ownership of God’s vision for ministry by the leaders and participants of the church. Conversely, there is invariably a clear absence of vision in those congregations in which there is neither spiritual nor numerical growth taking place. Rarely in my research do I find such overt, black and white relationships.”*

George Barna, *The Power of Vision*

**Healthy Churches Have Vision!** This is nothing new. But where does the vision come from? Some suggest from the pastor or leadership team. They cast the vision and convince or entice the people to follow. Others suggest it should come from the people. Actually, however, it is God’s vision the church needs – not the pastor’s or the leadership’s. The church’s vision must come from God.

**Healthy churches have a vision given by God!** But there is more. Does God only speak to pastors or leaders? Or does he speak to all members of the church? The scriptures make clear the priesthood of all believers. God speaks to the entire body! As the entire body listens, they can know God’s vision for their ministry. When they discover it collectively, they own it and develop a passion to see it realized. Therefore ...

**Healthy churches have a vision given by God, received and owned by all.**

The greatest thing a pastor or leader can do for the congregation is lead them in a discovery of the destiny God has for them. How can this be done? Vision Renewal uses many methods to involve the entire congregation.

**Healthy churches have a vision given by God, received and owned by all, and effectively implemented.** Churches can have the right vision but still not accomplish it. Vision Renewal provides an easy-to-follow structure that the leadership can use to establish action steps and monitor progress that will sharpen the church's effectiveness. Vision Renewal also provides a way of tracking responsibilities and maintaining accountability for the church's vision and action plan.

## **The Four Steps of Vision Renewal**

### **A. Assessing the Church Situation**

The four stages of Vision Renewal can be communicated simply using the acronym "A-B-C-D". "Assessing the Church Situation" is the first stage of the process. This stage includes planned activity that draws the whole congregation into active participation in the overall process. An evaluation of where the congregation is currently in its life and history are essential for providing a "reality base" for the vision casting activities that come later on.

**What to Assess** – The assessing stage of Vision Renewal aims at developing an accurate picture of where the church is today. It involves listening to the leadership as well as the congregation through systematic research to determine how the church is doing, or at least how they feel they are doing with regard to being a healthy church.



Many tools are available that assess various aspects of church health and some of them are very good.<sup>4</sup> Some churches have successfully developed their own method of doing assessment. The following Audits may assist your church in developing a research strategy that will work best for you.<sup>5</sup>

### **SWOT Analysis**

A SWOT analysis is simply the assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. If done well and involving a large sampling of people from the congregation, a SWOT analysis can provide a good assessment of the current health of a church. It might be helpful to begin by brainstorming with the congregation about the qualities of a healthy church. “What would be the characteristics of an ideal church?” This could be followed by a SWOT analysis and comparison between “our church” and “the ideal church”. Your SWOT analysis may include some of the following questions:

#### **Strengths:**

- What are our strengths as a church? What are we good at? What are we proud of? What do we do well?
- What makes us different from other churches in our area? How are we unique?
- Why do people attend our church?
- What is our church known and respected for in the community?

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<sup>4</sup> Outreach Canada has developed a web based survey called Ministry Fitness Check – [www.outreach.ca](http://www.outreach.ca) Natural Church Development has developed the NCD Survey tool – [www.ncd-international.org](http://www.ncd-international.org)

<sup>5</sup> More information on these Audits and more are provided by Malphurs, Aubrey. *Advanced Strategic Planning*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999.

- What qualities or ministries define our uniqueness from other ministries in the area? What services do we provide that they do not?

**Weaknesses:**

- What are our weaknesses as a ministry? What are we doing poorly? Or what should we be doing that we are not?
- Why have people left our church? What reasons or excuses do visitors give for not coming back?
- What are people saying about our church behind our back?
- What are the weaknesses of our leadership? The laypeople and volunteers?
- Where is our church in its life cycle?
- Are there any public sins or crisis in the past that continue to haunt us? Or have not been dealt with?

**Opportunities:**

- What are we doing now that we were not doing five years ago and what could we be doing in five years that we are not doing now?
- What are the significant unmet needs within our organization or community?
- What would our community say an effective church should be providing?
- What are the unique opportunities which lie before us in our community?
- What are the unique opportunities which lie before us in our congregation?

- What might God be calling us to do that no one else is doing in our area?

**Threats: (Limitations)**

People Threats

- What is not thinkable or discussable around here?
- Do we face or deal with our problems? What problems do we avoid?
- Do we learn from mistakes?
- What kinds of behavior do we condone that may hurt people?
- Do we have traditions that stand in the way of effective ministry?
- What other people obstacles do we face?

Organizational Threats

- Is our church organized vertically or horizontally?
- Is the power centralized or decentralized? (Do we operate by declaration or by democratic decision?)
- How our focus is balanced between church needs and community needs. Inward and outward?
- Do we provide feedback about how people are performing in ministry?
- Do we hold people accountable for the tasks they are responsible for?
- Does the church reward good behavior?
- Does the church respond to negative behavior?
- Do we provide ongoing training for our pastor, staff and volunteers?

In addition to a SWOT Analysis as described above, many churches would benefit from looking at their direction, their congregation and their finances. The more information that you can unearth about your church, the better equipped you will be to build your church profile and cast your vision. Here are some more questions to consider with your congregation.

### **The Direction Audit**

- Does our church have both a mission statement and a vision statement? Do we understand what they are supposed to say? If not, why not? If so, what are they?
- Are the stated mission and vision biblical?
- Are the mission and vision statements clear and memorable?
- How are we communicating our mission and vision to our congregation and community?
- How well are we accomplishing our mission and vision?

### **The Congregational Audit**

- Does the congregation consist of similar people (age, demographics, nationality, language, gender, marital and working status, etc)?
- Is the congregation well educated, what difference this might make?
- Where do most of our people work for a living? What does that mean for us?
- Where do most of our people live (house, apartment, urban, rural, etc) and how does this affect our ministry?
- What is the average income of our people (low, medium, high)? How might this affect our ministry?
- What is our church culture?

- What are some of our church's traditions (good and bad)?
- Who are our church's heroes?
- What do our people expect from the church?
- Do we have an unwritten code of do's and don'ts? What are they?
- What are our stories?
- What are our rituals?
- What are our symbols?
- What does the church reward?
- Do we support or resist change?

### **The Finances Audit**

- Does our church have a realistic budget to account for all income and expenses?
- Does our church consistently meet its budget?
- Is the church current on all of its bills?
- What is the current debt load of the church?
- What are our present giving trends (six months, one year, three years)?
- What is the average giving per family unit? Is this good or bad?
- Is the giving evenly distributed among the congregation?
- Are a few people giving most of the money? How may this affect the church?
- Are we adequately paying our pastor/s and staff?

## **B. Building the Church Profile**

In the second stage of *Vision Renewal* the focus is on gathering information about your community, history and congregation. This information is used to create profiles or summaries that will guide the prayer and planning process.

The first profile will be of the congregation its self. This profile will include all of the information gathered in the ministry assessment of stage one, as well as other statistics and documents that help to fill out the story of the church. The profile should include financial records, giving patterns, attendance records, demographic reports (age groups, marital status, employment, nationalities, languages, etc), a summary of the church's history, mission involvement, and churches planted. The report can also share information about the church's purpose, core values, as well as mission or vision statements along with supporting goals and objectives. This profile will be written and presented to the congregation to assist each member to see the big picture of who they are as a church.

The second profile is of the community in which the church meets. This profile will be pulled together by the vision team and it should include a complete analysis of the church's target area. The target area consists of the area surrounding the church or where the church has ministry presence and influence. Most churches can define their target area by drawing a circle with a two to five kilometer radius around their church. Other variables may be the location of cell groups, satellite communities, or businesses owned by church members. This external analysis should seek to answer the following questions:

- What type of community are we located in – urban, suburban, informal, or rural?
- What age groups are most prominent in our community?

- What is the recent history of the area and how does that impact current development?
- What is the ratio of men to women in the area?
- How many children live in the area?
- Where are most of the people in our community employed?
- Are most of the people married, married with children, or single?
- Do the people live in houses, apartments, other?
- Are people moving in or out of the area?
- What is the crime rate like – rising, falling, stable?
- Is the area growing, stable or declining?
- What transportation is available to the church?
- Do people from the community visit the church? When and why?
- Do the people in the community attend any church? What ones?
- Are the people in the community similar to the people in the church?

The intent of this analysis is to help us better understand our ministry environment and to understand the needs of our community. An informed congregation is better equipped to pray for their neighbors and to develop their ministries based on the needs in the community rather than just focusing on the needs in the church. If you want to be a Great Commission Church you must make it a priority to serve those who are outside of the church.

After developing the community profile, the congregation should consider what opportunities there are for them to develop “love bridges”

into their community. A love bridge is an opportunity for the church to function as the body of Christ by demonstrating love and compassion based on the felt needs of the people. Your church may consider providing a ministry or service to one or more of the following: unreached people groups, new people moving into the area, people isolated by language barriers, single parents, police, hospital workers, school teachers, local businesses, special people groups, or any other group or need that is identified in your research. Your ministry could be a custom fit between the strengths in your church and the needs in your community. Remember, God has placed you there for a reason.

### **C. Casting the Vision**

The third stage of Vision Renewal (Casting the Vision) is based on the insights gathered in the first two stages (Assessment the Church Situation and Building the Profiles). During this time, the vision team and coach will help the church dream about their future.

One of the best ways to facilitate group dreaming regarding the church's vision is to conduct a "Dream Session." The dream session is simply an opportunity to assure maximum participation in a limited amount of time. (This might take place on a Saturday morning.) A few simple preparations should be made:

- *Planning the meeting room set-up (tables, chairs, flip charts, masking tape or "Prestik", note paper, pens, refreshments, "highlighting" stickers),*
- *Appointing the session leader, table leaders, flip chart operators and helpers,*
- *Preparing announcements to promote the meeting.*



### **Conducting the “Dream Session”<sup>6</sup>**

**Sharing Circles.** After briefly reviewing the information gathered in the first two stages of Vision Renewal, the participants are invited in table groups of 6 to 10 people to share pictures, descriptions, and ideas they have about the preferred future that they envision for their church. These are “brainstormed” without any attempt to sort or evaluate the contributions. A table leader is to facilitate sharing as well as jot down the essence of what is shared (including the images and ideas). The concept of holding an “umbrella of mercy” over those with an “on the edge” idea or picture can help to create a sense of safety in sharing during this time. There is no right or wrong response. People need to be thanked for their contribution even if you think personally it lacks value.

**Report Back.** The table leaders are then asked to share the results of the sharing circles. The flip chart operators summarize them on pages (no more than 5 per page with a line draw between them) that, once filled, are posted by their helpers on the “dream” wall. As ideas or images are shared, the session leader should have other tables who also recorded the same thing to indicate. The number of tables should be written beside that statement. As the exercise progresses, only new contributions not previously noted should be shared. (I strongly urge that tables only share one thing on their list the first time around so that everyone is contributing and one table is not getting to put everything on the board.)

**Highlighting Exercise.** “Highlighting stickers” should then be distributed (Small coloured stickers of any shape). Each participant is given 10 stickers and is invited to place their stickers on the sheets to “highlight” what they feel are the most important ideas, images, and themes for the vision team to consider when writing the vision statement.

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<sup>6</sup> Conducting the “Dream Session” material is from *Vision Renewal Coach Training Manual* by Gibson and Kraft. These manuals are available through OCAfrica. [www.ocafrica.net](http://www.ocafrica.net)

**Compilation.** It is suggested that the flip charts be turned over the Vision Team who works together with a Vision Writer to begin crafting a vision statement for the church. The team should analyze the results to identify primary themes, images, and ideas. In light of the learning of stages 1 and 2 of Vision Renewal, the team should also seek to identify any gaps in the input provided. This information is now massaged into a written vision statement.

### **Writing the Statement**

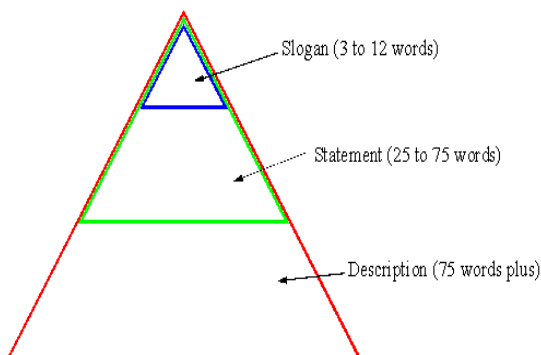
**Types of Statements.** Vision Statements come in various sizes and serve different purposes.

**Slogan** – “Growing Deeper – Spreading Farther”.

*Slogans* are brief and encapsulate the vision into a memorable phrase or sentence.

**Statement** – “Growing in Faith to present Christ to the world through our words and actions.”

*Statements* are short statements which share the vision in a series of simple and related ideas or images.



**Description** – “To grow in faith and influence that we may be a transformational presence in Blindale and to spread the Gospel through our words and action in our homes, businesses, schools, and communities so that all may come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.”

*Descriptions* are much longer and express the vision in a detailed, vivid and expanded form.

#### **D. Developing an Action Plan**

It has been said that failure to plan is planning to fail. The best vision statement is still only a dream until it is put into action. Developing an Action plan is the fourth and final stage of the Vision Renewal process which brings the work of the first three stages together into a concrete strategic planning that prepares the way for implementation and, ultimately, vision fulfillment.

It is essential that we continue to keep prayer as our priority in the planning stage. As the congregation prays and listens to God’s leading, they remain dependant on God for direction. Fueled by prayer, the action plan is crafted to enable the church to achieve its vision. The action plan is made up of goal statements and objectives. The goals may be seen as baby steps toward the final vision, and the objectives are the specific things that the church will do to take each step or realize each goal. Good action plans are made up of SMART goals. SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and trackable. A good action plan not only states the goals and objectives, but also includes the person or people responsible for the action as well as the measurement that will be used to determine if the Goals have been achieved, and the time frame in which they are to be achieved.

One of the goals of the church may be to involve more young people in the ministries of the church. The church may come up with several

objectives to help accomplish this, but one of them may be to start a worship band made up of young people. A good action plan will spell out specifically what the objective is, who is going to do it, when it should be accomplished, and how we will know when it has been achieved. Here is an example:

Goal – To see more young people involved in the ministries of the church.

Objective – Start a youth worship band.

Responsible – John and Temba will start contacting the youth to get it going.

When - The first quarter of the year.

Measurement – A four piece band that is ready to play in the worship service by 1 July.

During this final stage of Vision Renewal, church leadership, pastoral team, and vision team all work together to develop their action plan for the next year or two. Some churches may develop a one year action plan as well as a three or five year plan that would capture some of their long range goals and objectives.

Ultimately, Vision Renewal draws the full congregation together under the leadership of the vision team and allows everyone to participate in the development of a vision and action plan for the church. The more people involved in the development, the greater their ownership will be and the more likely the church is to see their vision realized.

Because all people, communities and churches are in a state of continual change, it is recommended that every church repeat this Vision Renewal process every three to five years. This will help the church insure that their vision still fits their congregation and community.

## Chapter 12

# Understanding the Lifecycle of a Healthy Church

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**M**any of us can relate to the story of this pastor:

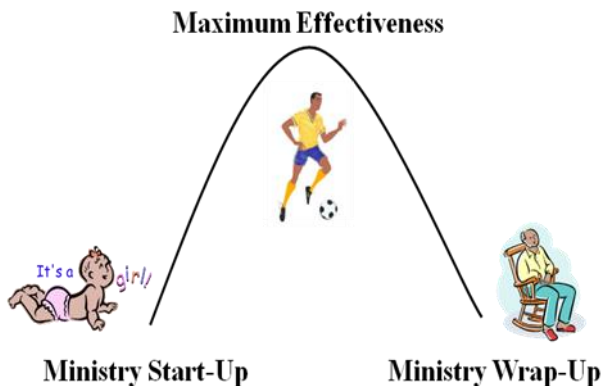
*“I was 26 years old and in my sixth year of ministry when the phone call came. A church that I had some familiarity with was asking if I would consider coming to be their Pastor. After some correspondence, research, consultations, and a lot of prayer, my wife and I agreed to Pastor the little church. This was a big step for us with a young family as we sold our home and moved a two day travel distance from our family to settle in with a new congregation that would be our family for the next six years.*

*Like most churches, this one came with a history. Under the leadership of two previous pastors this church had been born out of street crusades in the 1950’s. In the years that followed, the founding members met in a house and later a converted garage. In time they were able to purchase property and build their first building. By the end of the 70’s the church was under the leadership of their second pastor who expanded the building to accommodate the growth that*

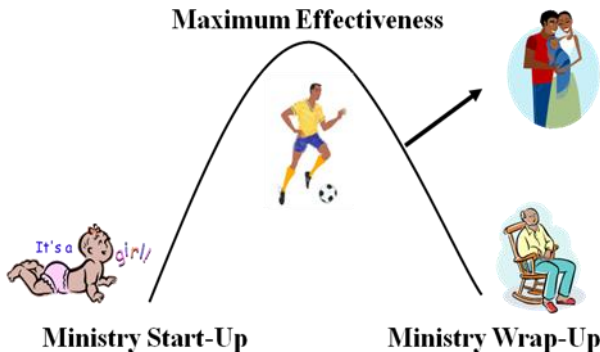
*they were experiencing and they added the ministry of a Christian School.*

*When I arrived in the mid 80's things had changed. The church had a great building, capable of comfortably seating over 300 worshippers. We had good offices and ample classroom space for Sunday school and Wednesday evening kids programs, but the classrooms were almost empty. This little church that had started with just a few families had at one time swelled to an average attendance of over 250 people, but on my first Sunday at the church there was scarcely 60 people on hand to welcome us. Where had they all gone? How will I rebuild this church?"*

This is an all too familiar story which illustrates vision erosion and the life cycle of a typical church. As we study the rise and decline of most churches we see that they follow a life curve that begins with their birth and ends with their death. In his book, *Corporate Lifecycles*, Ichak Adizes uses a bell shaped curve to describe the life-cycle of an organization. Churches and other organizations are like other living organisms. They have a lifecycle that begins with an idea or concept. The Church moves from being an idea to a reality when it is born or planted. New church plants have similar characteristics to a young growing child that is slowly



developing independence and experiencing the challenges of the world into which it has been born. The church develops and matures through infancy, to adolescence, and then toward maturity when it is functioning optimally. The majority of the church's members is growing in Christ, knows their spiritual gifts and are using those gifts to build up the body of Christ. However, like all living things, the church also has a time when it moves toward decline and ultimately death.



As pastors and church leaders, do we need to resign ourselves to the statistics and stand by and watch our churches pass through this life-cycle as if there is no hope? Of course not! When God created all living creatures, He created them with the ability to reproduce, each one after its own kind. The church is no different. The church of Jesus Christ has not only survived, but has thrived and expanded through the past 2000 years. God created the church with the ability to multiply and reproduce. I like to say that a healthy church is a reproductive church. Our churches can learn how to "jump the curve" and remain productive rather than moving into a state of decline, but it requires us to think differently about the life-cycle of a healthy church. Rather than seeing the life-cycle as a simple curve that has a beginning and end, we need to think of it as a circle that moves

through stages but then continues. A church can experience an infinite number of revolutions depending on its vision and leadership.

The ideal life cycle of a healthy church is to PLANT, GROW, MOBILIZE and REPRODUCE. This is the normal pattern for Christ's church to fulfill the great commission in Matthew 28:19. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you ..." (NIV)

We are called to PLANT. New churches or congregations are similar to newborn babies – they're dependent, need lots of nurture and support, and they are fragile. Primary tasks in this stage are the development of "personality", building of primary support structures (nurturing, discipling, team-building, vision-casting) and building a solid base of knowledge.

In this initial formation stage churches are focused on the basic, foundational tasks that will build a strong body for the future – just like a young child's personality and capacity for learning are determined before the age of five.

The second stage or challenge in a church's life is to GROW. Growing children are active, curious learners, constantly pushing past boundaries and growing out of their clothes. Churches in the grow phase are also concerned with developing their systems and structures to accommodate and allow for continued growth and health. Churches, again like children, develop greater independence and self-sufficiency.

Primary tasks in the grow stage include formalization of leadership structures, strengthening of systems to assimilate and disciple newcomers, and continuing change to achieve growth (numerical and spiritual).

The third stage in a church's life is to MOBILIZE. Young adults spend their time preparing themselves for work, career, and family while having

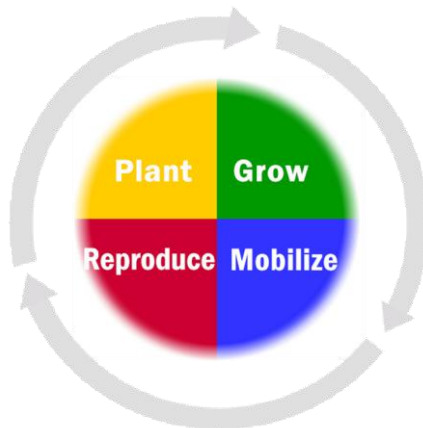


fun at the same time. Churches in the mobilize stage are equipping themselves and their people for serving, outreach and future parenthood.

Primary tasks include ongoing discipleship, empowering of new leaders, multiplication of workers and ministries, and increased focus on areas of giftedness. Vision and direction are enhanced and refined. Teamwork, communication and sharing the workload are critical to success, paralleling the real-world tasks of early adulthood.

The fourth, but not final stage in a church's life is to REPRODUCE. One of the most joyous times in life is for a couple to have a baby. Similarly with churches, parent churches are filled with anticipation and excitement to see the vision fulfilled, the life cycle complete.

Main tasks in the reproduce stage – birthing a spiritual baby – include identification of a target community, raising up of a planting team, securing of financial and emotional support, and planning for the adjustments of parenthood. These processes mimic the preparations for natural birth by the parents of a human baby.



As leaders we have the responsibility to pray with the other leaders and members of our churches and to work through a process of renewing our vision. God has positioned our churches for a purpose and we need to seek His purpose and develop a new vision to reach out to the young and struggling families in our immediate neighbourhood.

Our churches can “jump the curve”. Vision erosion causes us to think small and to stick to what has worked in the past rather than to be creative and look to the future. With a little bit of redirected thinking and a lot of prayer, God is able to help us see the future He has for the church, a future that involves planting, growing, mobilizing and reproducing.

Many churches need help to “jump the curve”. The following process of Vision Renewal will help to revitalize your church. The process should be led by a vision team from your congregation; this team may include some of your existing leadership but may also involve others from the congregation who may be able to contribute specific skills for the team. Valuable skills would include researchers for the church and community, a prayer coordinator, and vision writer to pull all of the discoveries together on paper. This process may be further enhanced with the assistance of a coach.<sup>7</sup>

An independent coach is helpful in that they are able to bring an outside perspective and assist the vision team in understanding the church and its context. Independent coaches also help us think outside the box and challenge some of our ideas or historical patterns of ministry. The purpose of the coach is to assist the church in its process of self discovery, not to tell the church what to do. Good coaches ask good questions and allow the vision team to discover their own answers.

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<sup>7</sup> Outreach Canada and OCAfrica have trained VR Coaches who are available to coach churches through the process of Vision Renewal. [www.outreach.ca](http://www.outreach.ca)  
[www.ocafrica.net](http://www.ocafrica.net)

## Chapter 13

# Leading your church toward renewed vision, growth and health



**W**hen most of us look at the challenges in our own church, we also look at the churches around us to find the solutions. We have trained ourselves to be great students of other pastors. We watch what they do, we measure their success, we read their books and then we try to do the same things in our own churches, only to find out that it doesn't work. Often the problem is that we are looking to man's solutions instead of listening for God's answers.

The first place that we need to go if we want to help our church grow and be healthy is to our knees. It all begins with prayer. If we are not praying and the people around us are not praying, how can we expect to see the path God has for his church? As we pray, we need to look to Scripture. The Bible is where God will speak to us through his own story and revelations.

Somewhere in the last ten years I heard someone preach a sermon on 1 Samuel 9-11. It must have been a great sermon, because I scribbled a few notes on an old receipt and tucked them in my Bible. I found that receipt on a bookshelf in my office a few years later. I have forgotten who wrote the sermon, but I appreciate the message to leaders about keeping the main thing the main thing.

There is so much to learn from the lives of great leaders. Some are remembered for their greatness and others for tragedy. Some start out great and then end in tragedy, often because they have failed to keep the main thing the main thing.

The first king of Israel is usually remembered for his tragic demise and the tenacity with which he tried to hold on to the position which God was taking away. While we may debate the decision leading to his appointment to the throne, Saul began nevertheless as a great example of leadership. An examination of King Saul's early rule yields three principal traits of godly leadership.

### **Position**

Saul's position as King was clearly established both in his personal life and in his community life. Saul had a clear anointing of his position through Samuel (10:1) that was confirmed through signs (10:9). His sense of calling came from within, but it was also developed in part through spirit led individuals. Internally he knew that God had called him to be King and he was willing to take on that mantle, but the strength of his leadership did not reside solely in his own personal sense of calling. Saul was also affirmed in his leadership by the community who proclaimed him king (10:24) and who celebrated his leadership at his coronation (11:15).

Saul's position was not the basis of his worth. Leaders must know who they are irrespective of their titles or positions. Position must not become the basis of esteem and self-worth. In the early years of Saul's reign we see that he considered himself little in his own eyes and he had a natural aversion to greatness (9:21; 10:21-23)

Leaders must first be willing to be followers until they are both called and affirmed. To be able to lead with confidence, today's leaders must have a clear calling from God and the confirmation from those whom they



loves his followers and desires the best for them. He will not settle for anything less than the best for those in his care.

Saul was passionate about the welfare of his people and he let them know it. He communicated his passion with clarity as he sliced and diced the oxen and sent them out to the people, calling them to rally together against their enemy. He called them together toward one vision; a vision which united them in heart, mind and strength.

Leaders must be passionate about the vision of the church, not the material “frosting” like finances and buildings. Leaders must keep the main thing the main thing. They need to be the local champion of the vision and passionately communicate that vision to their followers. It has been said that people will lose sight of the vision on an average of about 21 days. The effective pastor will find ways of keeping the passion alive and the vision clear before the congregation continually. Creative communication through print, drama, music, testimonies and other formats will assist the pastor to help keep the people passionate about the vision of the church.

◆—————◆  
***What brings out your passion? Do people  
around you see it? How are you bringing  
out the passions of others in relation to your  
church’s vision?***  
◆—————◆

## **Plan**

The difference between a dreamer and a visionary is a plan. A great leader is not only able to identify challenges and threats, but can also initiate a plan to overcome the obstacles in their path. God’s plan was simple – liberate your countrymen. Saul listened to the Lord and initiated the plan. The objective was clear – destroy the enemy’s grip through battle. Saul measured his resources and laid out a plan. His plan involved

deadlines (11:9), strategy (11:11) and the celebration of completion (11:15). Great leaders know the value in celebrating both the great victories as well as the small wins. Closure and celebration strengthen group morale.

Leaders cannot sit back and wait for someone else to lead for them. Leaders do not sit back in the stands and criticize the play on the field. They are in the field and leading the attack. Leaders must be people of action. Great leaders also understand the need of involving others in the plan. Vision Renewal seeks to involve the whole congregation through prayer and participation in feedback sessions, dream sessions, and strategic planning. The more people that a leader can involve in the planning process, the better the chances are that they will have ownership of the vision and the action plan. Ownership means participation. When the people own the vision and the action plans, they will give financially, they will contribute physically, and they will promote the vision externally. They will take on the battle plan and charge the enemy's strongholds.

◆—————◆  
***Where are you going and how will you get there? Are you the only one casting the vision and expecting everyone to accept and follow? Do your people understand the vision? How are you involving others in the vision casting and action planning?***  
◆—————◆

As we reflect on the life of King Saul, we see a leader who had a great start, but faltered when he allowed his personal agenda to come before God's agenda. As leaders, we must be accountable to keep God's thing as the main thing. Great leaders must first be great followers of God.

*"When we come to the end of ourselves, we come to the beginning of God" – Billy Graham*





Chapter 14

**Samples:**



**Part 1 – Sample Church Profile**

**Part 2 – Sample Community Profile**

**Part 3 – Sample Vision Documents**

**Part 4 – Sample Action Plan**



# **Part 1 – Sample Church Profile**





## Church Profile Report

2007

The New Life Church family is one based on a strong foundation of relationships. We are from the Blindale community and we are part of the Blindale community. About half of our people have been Christians for most of their lives, while the other half are new Christians who for the most part, have come to know Christ through their involvement at New Life. We have dedicated workers and our youth are stepping up to assume some areas of service, but we need more workers if we are going to continue to grow and expand our ministries. All members of our family enjoy our worship. We are dedicated to prayer. We love our pastor and trust the leadership of our elders. However, we do not always feel we are moving towards our goals. Members of our family feel unequipped to serve. So even though our people are happy with where we are as a church, we have lots of room for improvement.

**The following areas of Strength and Weakness are the result of the church health survey that we completed and from the congregational feedback meeting that was held on 3 February 2008.**

### **Areas of Strength**

#### **1. Worship**

We have a clear understanding of the preaching. Most of us are satisfied with the music balance and this leads to enjoyment of worship and a desire to be part of it. We do not, however, feel that we are experiencing or sharing God's working in our lives. Prayer is an important part of our worship.

#### **2. Prayer**

Prayer is seen as a major contributor to our on-going ministry. Though we are involved in praying for each other and the ministry of our church we do not always feel we have experienced the results of our prayers.

#### **3. Organization**

We are happy with the choice of our leaders and most feel that our church has an effective organizational structure that has clear lines of authority and accountability. While most that are serving in ministry say they know what to do and how to do it, there is a concern within the 36 to 55 age group that our leaders are not always sensitive to the needs of people and do not allow them to participate in decisions.

#### **4. Discipleship**

Most feel that the pastor's preaching stimulates our spiritual growth, but fewer of us think spiritual growth is being developed through home Bible studies, Sunday school, etc. An even lower percentage of us feel that our church has a plan for leading our people into a Christ-like living pattern. A large portion of us feel that there is not an effective plan to

provide a balanced coverage of biblical knowledge and doctrine. We don't feel we have a good way for new Christians to be disciplined.

## **5. Evangelism**

We feel that we have a vision for evangelism that begins with the pastor and our leaders and that there is a sense of purpose and direction for ministry as it relates to reaching our community. We see people coming to Christ through the ministry of our church, mostly children (64% of the total number of conversions in the past 10 years have been children; 21% youth and 15% adults) and we have a desire to share Christ with our friends. However, we do not feel that there is an identifiable strategy for reaching the unchurched and even if there were we don't feel we are being taught to share our faith.

### **Areas for Improvement**

#### **1. Fellowship**

We enjoy visiting with each other but there is room to develop a stronger sense of belonging and demonstration of hospitality within our family.

#### **2. Personal Experience**

We have confidence in our leaders, have recognized a positive change and have experienced growth in ourselves because of our attendance, and most of us feel supported by leadership in our ministry involvement. Not all of us pray every day or feel that we have developed meaningful relationships with each other. Many feel that they have not been disciplined by someone more mature, have not been sufficiently trained in order to effectively serve, are not involved in a personal plan of sharing their faith and are not as involved in the planning process as they would like to be. The adults over 35 felt our facilities were ok, but all of the younger people felt some dissatisfaction with them.

### **3. Planning**

Most feel that they understand and identify with the purpose of the church and that the church board annually reviews its strategy of ministry. The under 21 group is the only group that feel the congregation senses movement toward measurable objectives or goals. There is concern in all age groups that the church does not have a procedure to evaluate the effectiveness of its programs and set new goals.

### **4. Christian Service**

Once again, only the under 21 group felt that leadership has a plan for helping us find meaningful Christian service experiences. Most feel that the leadership of the church do not have a system to identify and track individuals involved in Christian service in our church.

### **5. Equipping**

All of us feel challenged to be involved in ministry in the church but most of us (except for the 55+ group) feel that training is not being provided for various kinds of ministry within the church. Even if training was being provided most cannot identify at least one spiritual gift and a ministry where it is being used. It was also felt by most (all but the 55+ group) that leaders are not being sufficiently trained in order to train others.

### **6. Programming**

There was some consensus among those surveyed that the church has developed a program to minister to the whole family. As well, some felt that the purpose of each program is clearly stated and understood. This is interesting because during research it was difficult to obtain clearly stated purposes for the programs we provide. However, most felt that the church has not identified people groups in the community for special



programming nor are programs being terminated when their purpose is better fulfilled in other ways.

## **7. Other Stuff**

Our church is generous and our giving has progressively increased. But when we analyze our giving 40% of those attending are not currently giving and 52% are giving less than the 10% tithe. As a strength this means we have lots of financial potential. Our attendance has progressively increased over the past year for worship services. Over half (51%) of the survey respondents indicated that they are serving in the church – that means that almost half are not serving. This too is exciting when you think of it as untapped resources!

### **At what life stage are we?**

There are four stages to the life cycle of a church:

- PLANT: Building primary support structures and a solid base of knowledge as well as focusing on foundational tasks.
- GROW: Formalization of leadership structures, strengthening of systems to assimilate and disciple newcomers and continuing change to achieve growth.
- MOBILIZE: Providing ongoing discipleship, empowering new leaders, multiplying workers and ministries, increasing the focus on giftedness, enhanced vision and direction.
- REPRODUCE: Reproducing by birthing a spiritual baby.

As a church we are in a life stage called “Grow”. We have continued to change and have achieved some growth, but we need to strengthen our systems in order to assimilate and disciple newcomers. We are faced with the challenge of how to disciple family members, especially new Christians, by someone more mature. Our strategy to reach the unreached and being

taught to share our faith is weak and is evident when you see that approximately 45% of our growth has been achieved by bringing in the lost (personal confessions) with 55% from transfers from other churches. A majority feel that equipping for ministry, mentoring and community outreach is needed.

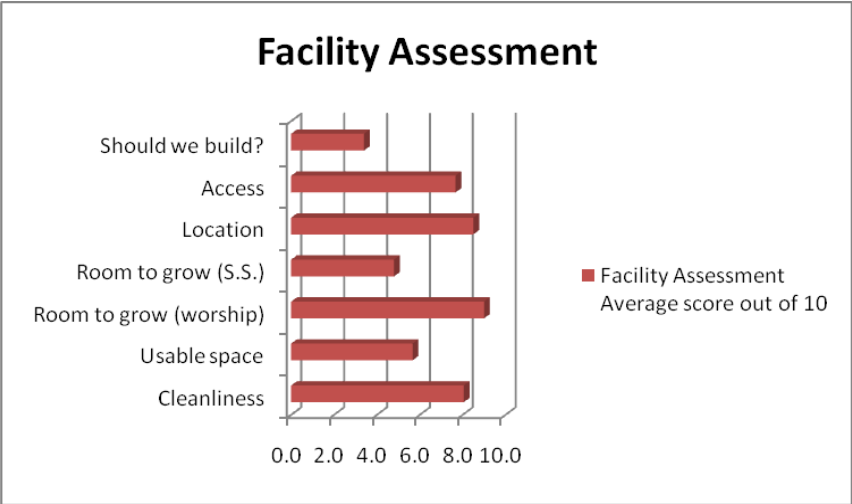
### **Conclusion**

We do have areas in which we need to grow stronger before we can move towards the “reproduce” life stage. Still, we have a lot of positive strengths within our family. God has provided strong leadership and family members that prayerfully want to seek Him. He has given us resources to move forward in fulfillment of His purpose for us.



## Facility Assessment

Overall: I have received 42 responses to our informal survey. Most seem to view our leased facilities as adequate for our worship services, but we need more space for our Sunday school ministry to be able to grow to its potential. Cleanliness is not great, but it is acceptable for a leased property.



Observation: I found it interesting to note that most people are not interested in building our own facility at this time. A few comments indicated that our money could be spent in

better ways than to tie it up in a building. Another interesting observation was that people are pleased with our current location and its accessibility. We are close to bus and taxi services which is important to many of our members.

Strengths: Our building is multi-purpose and most feel that we are using it to its potential.

Our location and accessibility are very good for most of our people.

We have adequate space to grow in our worship service.

Weakness: We need to find more space for our Sunday school and children's ministries.

Limited access to the building during the week has been a challenge for youth and children's ministries.



<p><b>Program Inventory</b></p>
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Overall: It was somewhat difficult to obtain information on what programs are running within our church. There are a few youth and children's activities that happen during the week in peoples' homes. There is a youth Bible study on Wednesday nights and Youth activities on most Fridays. There are several informal children's activities that are hosted by parents in the church on various Saturdays through the year, but nothing that is formal enough to be considered a program of the church.

On Sunday mornings, in addition to our worship service, we have Sunday school for children from the nursery up to grade 12. The children are divided into four separate classes based on their age.

Our church has a good women's ministry that meets for prayer, study and fellowship on the second Tuesday of each month.

We have three cell groups that meet on either a Tuesday or Thursday evening each week and there are approximately 30 adults involved in the cell group ministry of our church.

For the past two years we have had a men's ministry that meets for special functions three times a year.

Observation: It appears to me that there is no central area where one can get information on all the programs our church offers. What is more apparent is that the purpose of each program that I was able to become aware of and what age groups they were for, was not always clear.

Not owning our own facilities has limited the programs that we have been able to offer. It has also created a challenge in keeping track of who meets when and where.

Strengths: Our Sunday morning programs are well attended and have been highly impactful.

We do offer something for most age groups.

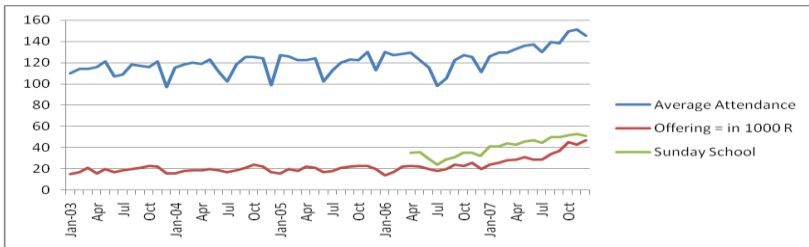
Weakness: Lack of facilities.

Although we offer programs, it is not easy to identify what they are and what the purpose of them is.



**Usher's Report**

Overall: We are thankful for the good records which we have been keeping over the past five years. We have accurate numbers of our attendance and offerings from 2003 to 2007 as shown below. Our attendance figures are based on adults in the worship service, and are an average of the weekly attendance figures for each month. We have also included the Sunday school figures for 2006 and 2007 as they have been reported by the teachers.



Observation: After four years of fairly steady attendance and offering numbers we have seen a significant increase in 2007. There are several spikes in our attendance pattern which seem to correspond to winter months with low temperatures. Our giving pattern also shows December and January lows, which would indicate that our

Christmas shopping, travel and activities seem to affect our tithing.

Strengths: Our record show consistency and stability moving toward growth over the past year.

Weakness: Our seasonal spikes in giving and attendance may be indicators of the commitment level of some people. We need to work toward more consistency and more thought might be given to why our giving is always down in December.



## **Part 2 – Sample Community Profile**





## Community Profile

### **Community of Blindale – Population of 23,710 people**

(This sample comes from Blairgowrie, Linden and Robindale, ward 99, located in the Johannesburg metro area of South Africa.)

#### **Early History**

Some of the earliest settlers were Bantu speaking Setswana groups who later shared the area with Ndebele people who moved into the area with Mzilikazi during the Mfecane (time of troubles) of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Nguni group later “moved” (or were pushed by a combination of Zulu and Great Trek Boer attacks) north into present day Zimbabwe, some of them did stay in the area. Although most were farmers, there is archaeological evidence that reveals metal items were forged by some of these early settlers not far from our target community.

The discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century changed the population dynamic. Although there were white farmers in the area as a result of the Great Trek, large numbers of Boer and English settlers moved into the region to try to either discover their own

mother lode or take advantage of the business opportunities offered by the gold rush.

Our community of focus was situated to the north of the main urban development in early Johannesburg. In the era following WWII, as the area around the city expanded, our focus community began its infancy stage. Primarily used as a farming area, some land was put into production as fruit orchards. Afrikaans speaking families, who lived on large lots, predominated in the post war period. However, the growth of the city and the demand for land slowly led to development in and around the fruit growing areas. By the late 1950 early 1960s, the orchards were gone as well as the majority of only Afrikaans people owning homes there. Townships with English, French and Scottish heritage names began to appear.

As apartheid became more of a volatile issue in the last quarter of the twentieth century, this section of Johannesburg became known for its “liberal” political outlook. That is, election results showed them increasingly at odds with the ruling party. The seminal election of 1994 revealed this trend. The region almost won a majority for the ANC. On the other hand, the ANC totals in PWV (now Gauteng) province lagged almost 16 percent behind the levels of support in the Johannesburg region that holds our community of interest. Clearly, the region was asking for change and running ahead of the rest of the province.

## **The community of focus today**

### **The people**

Our community is fairly homogenous for an urban community in Johannesburg. Roughly 72% of the population is categorized as “white” while 21% are black. The Coloured population is just below 2% and the Indian community’s numbers are just above 4%. In the region surrounding our focus neighbourhood, 26% of the population is black, 17.5% are coloured, 6.5% Indian and 49 percent white. The demographics reveal the region’s early history and population base remains relatively intact.

Another important factor to note is the ratio between male and females in our community of focus and the region surrounding it. The region shows that there are more females than males by about 5%. The community we are researching corroborates that trend with emphasis. The disparity in the number of females to males is even greater, around 9%. More research needs to be done into how this relates to or even reflects the issues regarding families in the area. (Single parents, homes split because of divorce, etc.; see the section on family.)

The neighbourhood also appears to be older than the region surrounding it. Around 51% of the population of our focus community is age 35 or older. The region surrounding it shows that about 45% are age 35 or older. Six percent of the populations in the region are children ranging in age from 0-4, while our focus community has about 4% of the population age 0-4. However, in children age 5-14, the percentages are almost identical at about 12.4% of the population. Fewer younger children are being born, appearing to indicate that families that have children are content with the numbers they have. The trend in the community, thus, appears to point to established (and perhaps older) families making their homes here as opposed to younger newly married couples starting families in the community.

### **Political implications**

Although historically classed as more “liberal” than others in their region or province prior and up to the elections of 1994, that trend is changing. Since the year 2001, the opposition party has captured the council seat in our community of focus. The area now favors the policies of the Democratic Alliance, as evidenced by the DA winning the councilor seats from 2001 to the present time. While they may have been pushing towards change in 1994, the political climate has changed somewhat and moved towards a more conservative philosophy.

### **The Languages**

Census information on languages in the area confirms the demographic information on ethnicity. English is the predominant tongue spoken in our community of focus. Over 57% of the population claim English as their first language, with just over 21½% of the people holding to Afrikaans. The largest indigenous African language is Setswana with just about 5% of population asserting that language as their primary language. IsiZulu, Sepedi, and “other” languages were measured at 4, 3, and 2¼% of the population. In the region at large, there were a higher percentage of Afrikaans language speakers than in our community, 24½% as compared to 21½% in our community. Clearly, urbanization, migration and globalization have contributed to the slow decline of Afrikaans in the community where it once was the dominant language. In the regional area, Setswana, IsiZulu, Sepedi, followed in order by a percentage. However, IsiXhosa was the fourth largest indigenous African language spoken in the region as opposed to “other” in our community being studied. There were differences in the percentages between neighbourhood and the region, but they were minor differences.

## **Economic Considerations**

Although this area was at one point in time seen as a leader in the business community (one of the first malls in the country was situated here), the last few years have seen decay and an attempt at economic revival. From a business standpoint, one perception is that the area is declining and stagnating. Statistics reveal that in 2003 some of the highest office vacancy results in Johannesburg occurred in this region. That rate has declined and the city is working hard to reverse that trend, but it appears safe to say that the area for the foreseeable future will not be at the cutting edge of business development.

However, while relegated to a secondary role behind newer and more modern office buildings, shops and malls, the region still can play an important role in the niche defined by the current market. While seen as less desirable, that also can translate into cheaper rent and lower overheads for smaller business attempting to revitalize or start anew. And while not staying abreast of some the other nearby regions, new malls and office buildings are appearing. They work to partially contradict the idea that the area is decaying. (In fact, there are billboards in the area announcing projects and stating they are part of the region's "revitalization".) One might say the area is growing, just not as fast as some of its competitors in other parts of the northern suburbs of Johannesburg.

There is money in this area and specifically in the community we are looking at. About 65% of the people earn over R19 200 annually and over 50% earn in excess of R76 800. The overwhelming majority of people live either in brick homes, flats or clusters. There are no informal settlements near our community of focus. Less than one percent of the population lives either in tents or in a caravan (vehicle). That doesn't mean that people in need are not in this community, but that there are plenty of resources to help those who are in need. There was no data found to correlate whether these income levels were sustained by one or two income earners.

While the region is not a pace setter in business development, in terms of employment the district ranks it up there with the best. While 65% of the population in the region did have a job, the percentage of those out of work hovered at about 10% (25% of the population was considered not “economically active”.) Our community of interest ranks significantly higher than the region. 74% were employed and only 3% were listed as unemployed while 23% of the population was listed as not economically active. In fact, the community had the best employment numbers of the region when comparing both rate of employment and percentage of those unemployed. Employment security, a huge issue throughout much of South Africa, does not appear much of a problem in this community.

### **Family Implications**

Figures for marriage and divorce were not available specifically for our community, but the 2004 Community Profile by STATS SA does yield some information of the family dynamics arising in the district containing this community. From 2003 to 2004 the number of marriages dropped by about 1¼% nationally. Gauteng has the second highest number of marriages per 100 000 people (only the Northern Cape is higher) and by far the highest number of divorces per 100 000. As a country, more people are getting married via civil ceremonies than religious. Likewise in Gauteng province, it appears this trend is very strong. Almost 2½ times as many marriages are performed by civil authorities as religious. In Gauteng, the rate of divorce is significantly higher for those married in a civil ceremony. Among population groups, Black Africans in Gauteng are much more likely to have a civil ceremony than white Africans.

The trend in marriages carries over into the district in which the community of focus is located. About 5% of all marriages in Gauteng took place in this district. Roughly 69% of marriages in the district were conducted by civil authorities. However, when looking at the number of divorces in Gauteng for the same year, white population groups sadly had a three to one ratio in regards to the dissolution of the marriage based on

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faith. In other words, for white people getting divorced in this district in 2004, there was over a three to one chance they had made marriage vows in some kind of religious ceremony. That trend continued into the district where our community of focus lies. Of those divorced in 2004 almost 71% of those separating revealed they had gotten married in some sort of religious ceremony. By contrast, Black Africans had a much lower divorce rate both at the provincial and regional level. To further contrast with our community under study, by roughly a four to one rate, those Black Africans divorcing said they were married in a civil ceremony.

While the white population is the majority in the area and considered the most comfortable economically, the family is at risk to a greater extent than any other group. To more fully fill out the picture, consider that the statistics show women are more likely to have remarried and divorced after a first marriage. The highest number of children impacted by divorce in South Africa lived in Gauteng. We know also that women outnumber men by about 9% in the community under study. More detailed studies need to take place, but a safe assumption may be that single parents and fractured families are numerous in the area being studied.

### **Summary**

The neighbourhood under study is fortunate in that it does not have to deal with problems familiar to many others in South Africa. Poverty, unemployment, housing, clean water and sanitation issues are non-existent in this community. Looking at only those statistics, one could assume the future was quite bright for the people in the community. What raises cause for concern appears to be taking place in the family. High economic achievement seems paired with a consumer (one may say also a nominal) mindset towards marriage and faith. Serving in a church or planting a church here may be more difficult than trying to start something in Soweto, Alexandra, or even an informal settlement. It appears modernity and all of its comforts/temptations have a strong hold on many families. Anyone attempting ministry needs to make sure what they do is

relevant and attractive from the start and meet felt needs. If not, it seems easy to surmise, the ministry, church can easily be discarded and something else found to take its place. The roots of faith and commitment are shallow here, perhaps even lying on the surface in this area. A master gardener is needed to help those roots reach deep into the soil.

### Sources:

- City of Johannesburg Web Site
- 2001 Census
- 2004 Community Census by STATS SA



## Community Survey Results

*104 surveys completed –*

*Questions asked are in the boxes and the responses given are listed below.*

### **What is the Greatest Need in our Community?**

Needs of teens (13)  
To know Jesus (7)  
Friendship (4)  
Loneliness (4)  
Love and not condemnation (3)  
Material needs (poverty) (4)  
Someone to care (2)  
More job opportunities  
Interdenominational gatherings  
Seniors activities  
Firm values related to biblical doctrines  
Relationships (divorce)  
Spiritual emptiness  
Singles group  
Child pornography  
Accepting diversification  
Broken homes  
Spirituality and joy in worship  
More open minded

Support for all aspects of family life including singles, parents, unwed mothers (2)

Dissatisfaction – wanting more

Good health

Stop playing church

Happiness

Family issues

Drug education and awareness

Outreach program

Lack of interest in church

Support for medical clinic

Supporting people with prayer needs

Schooling

Stress – people are too busy (2)

Get young married couples coming and committing to a church

Food banks

More evangelism

Lack of purpose

Keeping seniors and shut-ins informed of church activities

To be loved by those outside of your house – employers and the business world

Unity in body of Christ

No Answer (32)

<b>Are you and Active Member of our Church?</b>
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Yes – 84 or 81%

No – 20 or 19%

**Would most People consider putting their Children in a Church  
Children's Club or Family Sunday School Program?**

Yes – 57  
No – 6  
Maybe – 39  
Unanswered – 2

Comments:

Convenient time for family other than Sunday 11:00  
Need to personally invite them

**What do People consider important when looking for a Church to  
attend?**

Friendly people (28)  
Feel welcome (20)  
Gospel preached (14)  
Acceptance/non judgmental (15)  
Good sermons (6)  
Fellowship (6)  
Church in the area (6)  
Kids program (5)  
Senior pastor with strength and pastoral/elder support (4)  
Good music (4)  
Strong church community (4)  
Need to feel at home (5)  
Interesting programs (5)  
Fun (3)  
Relevant  
Spiritual food  
Bible study  
Love

Same religious belief

A God loving church

Sincerity

Truth in relationship to God

Not read sermon

More hymns

Strength in church congregation independent of pastor

Age of congregation (kids)

Pastor relates to today

Seniors activities

Church has good values

Worship

Social activities

Where the Holy Spirit is moving

Relating to pastor

Down to earth-ness

Not dull or boring

Caring

Community of likeminded people where they are safe to express their spirituality

Gospel related to our time

Smallest one I can find

Size

Open mind (3)

To identify with others

Sincere pastor

Where family goes

Flexibility of time (alternative to traditional 11:00 Sun am service)

Alive, upbeat service

Activities

Something alive

What they offer the community

Upbeat and down to earth

Meets needs of family  
See young people and have some friends  
Location (2)  
Spiritual atmosphere  
Worship style (2)  
Place that challenges them to grow in their spiritual walk  
Quality of choir  
Support in family  
Same denomination as past history  
Support and guidance in time of need  
A trustworthy leader

<b>Basis for Social Relationships</b>
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Family	83
Work	25
Recreation	24
Church	10
Friends	2
Neighbours	2
School	1
Other	2





## **Part 3 – Sample Vision Statement**





**Our Vision  
for 2010**

**Slogan**

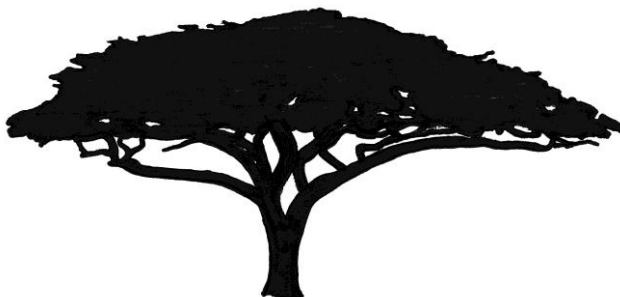
“Growing Deeper – Spreading Farther”

**Statement**

In 2010 New Life Church has ...

1. A healthy growing **team** of staff, leaders and volunteer workers.
2. **Caring ministries** to meet the critical needs within our community.
3. **A growing membership** who are discovering and using their spiritual gifts to build the Kingdom of God.
4. **New believers** who are receiving the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ and who are being disciplined toward spiritual maturity.
5. A surrounding **community** that values our “kingdom” contribution.
6. A **joyful spirit** of unity, belonging and momentum.

**Description:**



- Sun, Soil and Water (blessing)
- Roots (leadership)
- Trunk (structures)
- Branches (ministries)
- Leaves (members)
- Fruit (new believers)
- Shade (impact)

**We envision ...**

**Roots** – An expanding network of leaders who demonstrate commitment, competence and chemistry that will help us connect to God’s resources.

**Trunk** – Expandable structures (facilities and organization) for our church life to accommodate a long term pattern of rapid, but consistent growth.

**Branches** – A “full service” ministry care program to address the full range of needs within our congregation and community.

**Leaves** – Flourishing members of all ages and nationalities with strong connections to God and those around them who produce fruit according to their place, passion and gifting.

**Fruit** – An annual crop of new believers who ripen into mature disciples and reproduce themselves in God’s time.

**Shade** – An expanding “kingdom” impact upon the people and overall quality of life of our region.



# **Part 4 – Sample Church Action Plan**







### Vision Renewal 2010

## **Action Plan - Assignment**

### **Background to This Exercise**

To complete the "Vision Renewal 2010" Action Plan, the Vision Team recommends that the Elders give an assignment of the ten goals for 2008 to various leadership and ministry groups for development during the next three months. This assignment is designed to assist the Elders in making those assignment decisions in their November 2007 meeting. A work sheet will be provided to guide groups receiving "Action Planning" assignments.

### **Assignment of Action Planning Responsibilities**

<b><i>Goal Area</i></b>	<b><i>Goal</i></b>	<b><i>Assigned To</i></b>
#1 (Roots)	We have grown a healthy staff (pastoral and support) at a ratio of 1(FTE) for every 100 people at WCMC.	
#2 (Trunk)	<i>We have developed facilities, foyer and parking to accommodate adequately a full service ministry program for a congregation of 1200.</i>	

#3 (Trunk)	<i>We have expandable “meta church” organizational structure and operating policies and procedures to empower our leaders, ministries, and people for service.</i>	
#4 (Trunk)	<i>We have office and ministry technology that is updated to “state of the art” standards as well as an upgrade plan to stay current.</i>	
#5 (Trunk)	<i>We have a “vision based” annual operating budget of R1.5 million that is fully funded by our congregation.</i>	
#6 (Branch)	<i>We have an effective plan for assimilating, discipling, caring and mobilizing people of all ages for ministry according to their gifts and passion.</i>	
#7 (Branch)	<i>We have a “meta church” people care network in which at least 60% of our congregation actively participates.</i>	
#8 (Branch)	<i>We have developed our worship and missions ministries at WCMC as “signature” ministries by which our congregation is known beyond our area.</i>	
#9 (Shade)	<i>We have launched ministries and/or placed WCMC ministry people in community services that address the major areas of community need in Wilmot Township.</i>	

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#10 (Fruit)	<i>We have 1 in 5 of our people who can say either "I am a new believer or have been directly involved in bringing someone to Christ in the last three years"</i>	
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**Assignment of Deadlines:**




**Vision Renewal 2010**
**Action Plan**

The following is not a complete action plan but rather a sample. This sample looks at five goals/actions in relation to New Life's Vision and Objectives.

<b>Goal/Action Step</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>	<b>Responsible Person</b>
<b>Healthy pastoral/support staff (Roots)</b>		
1.1 Long range hiring plan finalized	March 08	Pastor and Elders
1.2 Prospective staff development plan finalized	May 08	Pastor and Elders
1.3 Prospective staff development program launched	August 08	Pastor and Elders
<b>Vision Based Budget fully funded (Trunk)</b>		
2.1 Stewardship campaign completed	December 07	Finance Committee
2.2 Vision based budget process finalized	March 08	Finance Committee
2.3 Vision based budget training completed	June 08	Finance Committee
2.4 Vision based funding strategy finalized	June 09	Finance Committee

Goal/Action Step	Completion Date	Responsible Person
<b>Assimilation and Care Systems (Branches)</b>		
3.1 Assimilation and Care strategy plan finalized	June 08	Pastor and Elders
3.2 Congregational care education campaign completed	Dec 07	Pastor
3.3 Counseling program/service launched	March 09	Pastor and Elders
3.4 Care systems training program implemented	December 09	Pastor and Elders
<b>Worship and Missions (Branches)</b>		
4.1 Drama and Dance teams formed	April 2008	Worship Director
4.2 Worship training strategy launched	September 08	Pastor and Worship Director
4.3 Missions team restructuring completed	November 08	Missions taskforce
4.4 Missions impact plan finalized	December 08	Missions taskforce
<b>Community Service Presence and Services (Shade)</b>		
5.1 Community impact plan finalized	September 08	Outreach Taskforce
5.2 First community service program launched	September 09	Outreach Taskforce
5.3 Second community service program launched	September 10	TBA

Goal/Action Step	Completion Date	Responsible Person
<b>Evangelism Mobilization (Fruit)</b>		
6.1 Evangelism strategy finalized	September 07	Pastor and Elders
6.2 Evangelism Team (E-Team) identified	March 08	Pastor John
6.3 Evangelism training program launched	July 08	Pastor John
6.4 Evangelism conference held	November 08	E-Team
6.5 Annual "Fruit" recognition event launched	June 09	E-Team
6.6 People sharing their faith and inviting their friends to outreach services and events	Continual	All

These are just examples of how the Action Plan will flow out of the Vision Statement. Each action item is specific and measurable and indicates when it will be completed and who is responsible to complete it.