

Faith Pulpit

Mission Statement: Conformity or Conviction?

“At First Baptist Church we are committed to...” “Our mission is...” Do you have such a statement in print or posted at your church? If any organization should have a mission statement, it would be a local church. But a mission statement must be more than an implementation of a popular trend, as one book on church evaluation reminds us: “For some organizations, including congregations, vision statements are just so much window dressing. Like earlier ventures into management by objectives and strategic planning, formulating vision statements can function primarily as a ritual—a rather empty one—that a congregation engages in because other organizations and congregations are doing it, or because a denomination requires it, or because the congregation’s leaders think it might be a good idea. It gives them a sense of legitimacy.”¹

What Is a Mission Statement?

A mission statement is not a summary sentence or brief descriptive paragraph to legitimize pet programs or justify the status quo. It does not necessarily rule out favorite ministries or long-standing traditions but should reveal, rather, that the Bible has been studied and the local ministry prayerfully evaluated in light of Scripture.

More recent literature on the subject makes a distinction between mission and vision statements. The mission statement is a declaration of the purpose of the ministry. The vision statement paints a picture, revealing how the mission statement will look when applied to a particular ministry.²

Hans Finzel enables us to capture the spirit of the mission statement in these words: “Mission and vision statements are like glue. They help leaders hold an organization together. They are like magnets, attracting newcomers as members, employees, customers, or donors. They are like yardsticks by which a leader can measure how his group is doing. And they are like a laser pointing you to your destination.”³ A mission statement is the foundation of a ministry. The superstructure must be

consistent with its foundation, if what is built is to last (i.e., if it is to pass the test of fire described in 1 Corinthians 3:11–17). The mission statement, therefore, must reflect the Bible’s mission for the church. Applying this truth focuses the ministry on God’s purpose and enables a church to major on the Lord’s priorities.

A mission statement is to be both limited and universal. It is limited to the theology of God’s Word. In this sense it is not original, since it is directly formulated from the Bible. It is universal in that it must apply to all ministries of the local church. If it is not universal, a theological dichotomy in the ministry results. A pragmatic headache also results, as a church finds itself operating part or most of its ministry on the basis of biblical mission and the rest on the basis of whatever caused the dichotomy.

Formulating a mission statement based on the Bible requires serious thought, prayer, evaluation, and acceptance by church leadership and membership. Several key questions must be addressed during the process of producing and adopting the statements. If they are not, the ramifications will come as a surprise and will lead to resistance.

Will It Be Known and Promoted?

After its acceptance, will your mission statement gather dust? Is it destined to become one of the sacred (but neglected) cows that form part of the nostalgic tradition of the church? Or will it be promoted as a dynamic driving force to keep ministry on track? If the mission statement really expresses God’s intent for your service, it must be consistently communicated. Posting it in the area of heaviest traffic is nice, but sharing it from the pulpit is mandatory. This teaching enables the mission to be “caught as well as taught.” The visual display declares your intent, but the verbal declaration demands involvement.

Are We Ready To Do Serious Evaluation?

Ever challenging God’s people to greater ministry effectiveness, Howard Hendricks writes, “Every year every program in our churches and ministries should have to stand trial for its life on the basis of biblical objectives, relevance to mission, and practical effectiveness.”⁴ Extensive evaluation may not take place every year, but frequently a church needs to be brutally honest about how the various aspects of its ministry conform to or contradict its mission. This task is not easy, for it is hard to be objective when evaluating from the middle of your “pride and joy.” But we must prayerfully perform this hard but necessary task. Again, Finzel prods us: “Everything that happens in your church or group should be evaluated in light of its vision. Sometimes we have to give up programs that keep us too busy to accomplish the real goal. We cannot begin new initiatives that drive us to our destination if we are too busy maintaining the status quo.”⁵ Honest evaluation prepares a church for the really tough questions.

Do We Have Ministries That Contradict or Erode Our Mission Statement?

Here's a tough one. Integrity demands honest evaluation, and courage is required to take steps necessary to remove that which counters or hinders the fulfillment of the church's mission. The question for a pastor is not whether it is right to make the necessary changes. The question for a pastor is, "Am I willing to courageously and lovingly lead in pruning dead wood?" Such a task must not be done with impatient brashness. A pastor must communicate to his congregation the biblical rationale for the change. This explanation should not be a one-time announcement, since time is necessary for the congregation to digest the information. Opportunities for input and questions are also needed. But after all the bases have been covered, the excision must be done. It must be done in a manner that is sensitive to the feelings, but truth, not sentiment, is the bottom line.

Are We Programmed to Fulfill Our Mission Statement?

The previous question deals with subtracting something. This question may require significant addition. Adding does not have to be a problem. It is the challenge of progress, and the proper approach can offset a negative reaction to change. Adding mission-oriented ministries offers the advantage of consistency with biblical principles. To fulfill the mission of the ministry one should ask more questions. Do we have the resources, such as people to participate and finances to fund the ministry? Is there space for the ministry to function? Relocation, remodeling, or construction must be addressed. Are we ready? Readiness requires thorough planning and communication. Another question must be asked in order to maintain integrity in the application of the mission statement: Are we as a congregation willing and committed to incorporate it and all of its implications? An honest answer to this question reveals whether the mission statement stems from conviction or mere conformity to keep up with the times.

Will It Drive Our Decisions?

This question brings it all together. If the mission statement drives decisions, the implications are non-negotiable. They may vary from ministry to ministry, but the principles are the same. The character and convictions of the people who minister must be consistent with the statement. Time commitments should reflect what is necessary to accomplish the ministry without cutting corners. Probably the biggest issue to be faced is whether budget decisions reflect the church's mission. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:34). This truth is certainly reflected in church budgets, as well as personal budgets. An individual's checkbook reveals values. So does the church's list of expenditures. The budget is perhaps the best indicator of a ministry commitment to its mission statement.

Conclusion

Do you have a mission statement? If so, is the congregation aware of it and reminded of it often? Are you programmed to fulfill it? Do you evaluate programs and ministries in light of it, adding and subtracting when necessary? Does your mission statement drive your decisions? Having a Bible-based mission statement and a commitment to it will enable all of us to fulfill the Lord's universal mission statement, summarized in His last challenge: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19,20).

Works Cited

1. Nancy T. Ammerman et al., eds., *Studying Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 181.
2. Ammerman, 179–190; George Barna, ed. *Leaders on Leadership* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1997), 41,42 and 47–60; Glen Daman, *Shepherding the Small Church* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 209–233; Hans Finzel, *Empowered Leaders* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 91–93.
3. Finzel, 96.
4. Howard G. Hendricks, *Color Outside the Lines* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1998), 134.
5. Finzel, 95.

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