

# *Guide for a congregational “vision”*

## Introduction

So, it's been a while since you reviewed your congregation's mission statement, or maybe you don't have one.

Or, you are beginning to look afresh at what you think God is calling your congregation to do at this critical time in your history. And you'd like to know how to proceed. This guide is designed to help.

What's the background for such a guide?

In 1998 the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America formed a synodical task force entitled Vision 2000 to devise a strategy for evaluating the work of the Synod and for discerning how synod audiences feel about how God is calling us to service at this time. The “vision” part of the process led the task force to carry out four focus groups involving lay and professional participants of all ages. The only requirement was that respondents profess a faith-filled passion for the church and its mission for Christ.

A report of the Vision 2000 process was carried in the 2000 Synod Assembly Bulletin of Reports. The process generated much interest. In particular, the task force fielded many queries about whether the process might be adapted so that a congregation could carry it out for itself, possibly also including others in their community on their vision “journey.”

This guide is a response to that interest. It is produced with several concerns in mind. First, according to denominational research, many congregations do not practice strategic planning with any regularity. In addition, some congregations seem more focused on preserving themselves rather than on doing mission. Quite a few congregations go about their work in relative isolation within their communities.

This disquieting data is not to say that the past is not worth celebrating. Nor does it mean to suggest that the Holy Spirit is never or not a force in the lives of the faithful in such settings. But this evidence is in sharp contrast to the church's mission potential in a society tragically diminished daily by misspent or underutilized resources. Hence, it makes sense to martial our minds and spirits around a regular planning process to ask ourselves, “What is God asking of us in this time and place?”

In preparing this guide, Mark A. Staples, co-chair of Vision 2000, is grateful for the cooperation and support of consultant Marti Wilson, who captained the Vision 2000 strategy.

Note: Mark A. Staples serves as Director of Faith and Life Programs for The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. During his career as a marketing and media consultant, Mark has led and continues to teach seminars on Marketing Fundamentals to

Delaware Valley non-profits for the La Salle University Non Profit Center. He recently co-directed a Capital Appeal effort, which generated \$1.5 million in pledges for Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lansdale, PA, where he has served on the congregation council. At one time Mark served as Features Editor for The Lutheran magazine.

*Let's begin!*

### ***Step one: A plan for prayer***

**Group prayer and reflection** is a vital first step. Each event described herein could be structured to lead off with reflections on the biblical journeys of Jesus and the disciples, taking note on how the telling of stories plays a foundational role in how we learn from Scripture about direction for our lives and ministry together.

**For example**, in reflecting on the Road to Emmaus scripture, do we ever order our lives, even our church lives, around activities without taking into account sufficiently the presence of Christ in our lives? What steps might we take to alter our approach? The Vision 2000 events led off with a Prayer Circle, inviting participants to share prayer petitions. The prayers always asked for God's presence and guidance in the visioning and story-telling that was about to unfold.

### ***Step two: Celebrating history***

In order to articulate a vision of substance for the future, it's important to **know where you've come from**. It's critically important to revisit a congregation's roots, to prayerfully and mindfully celebrate the past. This kind of celebration properly recognizes how we have gotten to a particular place and time. It also properly acknowledges that without the energies of our faith forebears it wouldn't be possible to plan for the future. Because we live in such a mobile society, any congregation will logically have on its rolls newer members who may not have a knowledge or appreciation of the formative chapters of a church's life.

**Conduct an afternoon or evening potluck meal as an event to celebrate the chapters and recollections of your congregation's past.**

Such an event requires a facilitator. Such a person could be an outsider trusted by parishioners to moderate the experience so that everyone in the congregation, including the pastors and lay leaders, can participate fully. Everyone connected with the congregation should be invited to such an event and be encouraged to give voice to their memories and reflections.

If you've developed a history of the congregation, it may be helpful to urge people, especially newer members, to visit the church's history by reading it over in advance. Once the celebration day arrives, many facilitators find it helpful to post tear sheets on

the wall so they may write down highlights of what they hear. The tear sheets may be arranged to form a time line. **Think about asking for reflections that cover five-year intervals. To simplify matters, arrange the timeline according to years of service by pastors. Many parishioners will tend to recall the history of their church, particularly significant episodes, by being reminded of pastors' dates of service. Or, the timeline could include as you post it, references to major events.** Such as, a new church was built in 1950. An expansion to the building was constructed in 1972. Or the church purchased a new pipe organ in 1960. Perhaps the congregation had a record year of new members. Or perhaps the congregation's community was dramatically influenced by the start-up (or decline) of a major industry or business in town.

**It is important to make room for any and all reflections.** Remember, almost no congregation's life is without trials or misfortunes. Likewise, none is without occasions of great joy. Just as individuals have strengths and weaknesses, so do congregations. Now may be a good time to be honest about each in terms of your congregation. **And the dinner should be a "safe place" for candor.** Tears and laughter will both likely mark such an occasion.

The facilitator could ask everyone to begin by saying, "I remember when..." Shut-ins or those unable to attend that day could be encouraged to write in their comments or submit an audiotape that might be played for the occasion. Newer members might be encouraged to talk about what was going on in their lives in the community or elsewhere as the significant chapters of their adopted church unfolded. How did the congregation's history fit into the developments in the community or region – the world? When did the congregation get its first computer?

At the end of the day, it would be appropriate for someone to write up a report of the recollections, making use of the tear sheets. Perhaps this event is an occasion to write a congregational history if one has not been undertaken in recent years. Make sure that a copy of the report is offered to anyone in the church who wants one.

### ***Step three: Follow up and reflect***

Once the history has been documented and developed into a report of the day, it is useful to have a **second dinner or special occasion.** Now that the history is out on the table, ask people to reflect on how parishioners and others understand themselves as a people of God. **To this point, how would they complete the statement, "We are the people of God who..."**

Have the facilitator record from each person one idea that completes the sentence, "We are the people of God who..." The facilitator goes around the room soliciting one idea at a time from each participant and keeps going around the room until everyone has exhausted their list of ideas. **Every comment is valid. Again, it is important on such an occasion for the church to be a "safe place" to make remarks. It is also important to remember that not everyone will be comfortable commenting. But everyone with a**

**passion for the life of the congregation, leader or not, should feel free to comment.** See if a consensus surfaces during the course of the remarks. Again, remember, every church has strengths and weaknesses. Each congregation has its share of heartaches and joys. Work to invite shut-ins or those who can't attend to send in their reflections in advance for inclusion on the list and add the absentee responses to the tear sheets after the attending participants have ended their remarks.

Once all the ideas have been written down on newsprint, ask each participant to study the entire list and **write down on a piece of paper the three responses that seem most appropriate.** As the session concludes, report to attendees the three responses that were the most popular. Then, have someone prepare a report that lists all the responses and the most popular selections in descending order of preference. Make sure that anyone in the church who wants a copy of the report gets one.

#### ***Step 4: Now let's look ahead***

And now, after some time for reflection has elapsed, it's time for a third event. Again, the invitation is open. A dinner is a logical gathering place. The facilitator works as before, making use of tear sheets for recording responses. As the session begins, the facilitator opens with a reprise of the history and the comments of the previous meeting, encouraging people to recall the previous reports and dispensing highlights of each.

**Then, the facilitator spends some time asking participants to close their eyes and imagine an ideal setting without limits and with sufficient resources. For the moment, it is critical that people put out of their minds any barriers or obstacles that could subdue a vision or idea. The facilitator asks attendees to think about "what our congregation would be like in several or five years if God had God's way." What would be happening? What would the town newspaper be saying about the church? What would the congregation look like? What would be its primary activities? Who would be there? What would the congregation be known for?**

After time is set aside for thinking of responses, the facilitator goes around the room, asking each person to make one response at a time. People are free to pass or not participate if they are uncomfortable about saying anything. The facilitator continues going around the room until all ideas are out on the table. All ideas are again listed on the tear sheets as they are offered. If time permits, it may make sense to divide the room into several small groups to discuss the ideas. How do they sound?

Then, back in the large group, each person is invited to once again reflect on all the ideas listed and **pick his or her three favorites, writing them down.** The facilitator, or someone else, **agrees to write a report outlining all the ideas and noting the ranking of the top three.** Please keep in mind, participants do not need to individually rank their favorite ideas. Just list three of them. The ideas will acquire a ranking by the number of times they are mentioned by the whole group.

Such a process could be followed up any number of ways. Congregation council or a task force could be empowered to react to the ideas and come up with a strategy for how they might be brought to fruition.

***Step 5: And finally...***

**Did any of the ideas suggest the possibility of alliances with other congregations or organizations within the community? Perhaps neighbors, other church groups, or community organizations, could be invited to a potluck to explore issues or concerns that arose in the planning.** Keep in mind the kinds of agreements that have been fostered ecumenically in recent years – the Lutheran-Reformed agreements, the Joint Declaration between Lutherans and Roman Catholics and Lutherans and Episcopalians. It is a changing world. For example, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia primarily hosts Lutheran students, but on its rolls have been learners from 30 denominations. The Seminary is certified to teach future United Methodist leaders and the school has a covenant with General Seminary, an Episcopal Seminary in New York's Manhattan. Few organizations, and that certainly includes churches as well as seminaries, have the resources alone to solve pervasive community concerns. But the right alliances may provide for creative cross-functional solutions and the resources to win the day!

It is in fact possible to design the above events to include a cross-section of community believers and organizations in order that a cooperative visioning effort might be achieved! **It would be wise to determine at the outset of a visioning process how ready your congregation could be to involving others in a visioning process.**

■ Mark A. Staples

*Do you have questions about how to carry out the above-detailed strategies? Contact Mark A. Staples at 215/248-7352 or e-mail him at [mstaples@Ltsp.edu](mailto:mstaples@Ltsp.edu).*