

The Salvation Army Leadership Letter

Issue 13:



Te Ope Whakāora

Testing your new Church Dream

Dear Bob

You asked me for tips on testing your new church dream—now that you’ve developed it along the lines of Leadership Letters 10 and 11.

There are of course several other planning methods you could have used to find your new dream—each with its own set of questions to ask when completed.

But if I led an established church, I’d follow the guidelines I gave you—and when I’d completed the planning exercise, I’d put the written-up dream through the following two tests to guide me as to how likely it would be to come true

The Key Principles Test

The first test focuses on the eight principles that must be true of your new church dream—because if they’re not true, you’ll probably never reach your dream. And although these principles are very closely related (and even overlap), we’ll deal with them one by one so we grasp the significance of each—and the stunning combined power of the whole.

1. The strategic plan, and especially the graphic, that captures your dream should show a very strong sense of journey—starting with the present and taking you to the better and brighter future you’ve dreamed about.

This sense of journey is so important that anyone glancing at your graphic should see it straight away and grasp your dream’s broad features and sweep in a few seconds. God used this principle with Abraham when he gave him a ‘graphic’ view of the Promised Land after Lot left him (Genesis 13.14-17). Sometime later, when his dream was fading and all hope seemed gone, God repeated the process beneath the starry sky (Genesis 15.1-5)—and those two graphic experiences sustained the wandering Abraham till the end of his days.

That’s how dreams work. As Bill Hybels says, ‘A vision [or dream] is a picture of the future that produces passion in you’; and where there isn’t a clear picture of the journey and its destination there won’t be the passion needed to see the dream through. I’ve found many of us are picture people, and for a plan to succeed it must have a strong sense of journey. Most plans I’ve seen over the years don’t have this dynamic—they may be all words (for example, a collection of critical issues), or words and a nice picture (and I’ve seen some very nice pictures). But there’s no sense of journey, nor any consequent passion; so not surprisingly, most of these plans never come true.

If people have to study the graphic that captures your dream, think about it, or go away and reflect on it before grasping it, your dream will probably never come true!

2. The journey, captured by your graphic, should have a very clear start and finish—for example, beginning on 1 May 2006 and ending on 31 December 2010; and that start and finish should be clear the moment you glance at the graphic.

Whatever else the graphic shows, or doesn't show, viewers should know at once when you began the journey—and when you plan to reach the destination of this particular dream.

3. The start and finish, like the crucial stages in between, must capture the key growth indicators of your journey—like Sunday attendances.

So if you're running at 100 on Sunday mornings on 1 May 2006 and aim to be at 200 by the end of 2010, your graphic will show 100 at the 1 May starting point, and the expected end-of-year attendances for each year through to the end of 2010 (with its 200 expected attenders).

We prioritise Sunday attendances because they give us our best feel for what's happening in a church—if people are attending in increasing numbers, something must be bringing and holding them; if attendances are falling, something must be turning them away. Denominations work the same way—sustained decline indicates people are leaving their churches and ministries; rising attendances indicate people are attending their churches in increasing numbers. The Sunday services are thus the 'shop window' of a church (and denomination)—giving us the broad picture of what's going on inside.

4. The strategic thrust of your plan must prioritise opening the front door of the church (Sundays) and closing the back door (Spiritual Growth—especially through small groups).

If the broad thrust of our mission statement or slogan is to help people find and follow Jesus (evangelism and discipleship)—and change the world they live in (reforming society), the strategic plan our graphic captures will follow the journey of a prospective disciple from the moment we first contact them through weekday ministries, etc, through to their departure to be with Christ.

So when we're creating a plan, we put a huge amount of focus on, and energy into, the journey of the prospective disciple—and especially the critical moments when they start attending church on Sundays and, coming to faith in Jesus, join a small group. That is, to grow our church through conversion growth over the long haul, we need the best possible seeker sensitive services we're capable of (with top Biblical preaching), and the biggest possible number of people in great small groups. Many years ago, I watched a church grow by 640% over a number of years, and move from nought to 300 in small groups—the Sunday services opened the front door of the church, and the small groups shut the back door. So the church grew enormously—and years later, it's still a great church!

Clearly, if people won't attend our services, we're 'sunk'; and if they won't attend our small groups, we're unlikely to hold them over the long haul. So our plan prioritises the front and back doors.

5. Each main ministry or focus of the church must have measurable goals.

We do this for Sundays so we can *track* our progress in this key indicator (like an indicator booth at an election!), *plan* ahead and *budget* for any auditorium changes needed later, *find* and *grow* the leaders we'll need later for the bigger music team and larger children's ministry in church time, and *factor* in the flow on for small groups further down the track. So far from it being 'unspiritual' to focus on numbers, as some leaders suggest, it's simply good stewardship and great common sense.

We do the same strategising with the Spiritual Growth track with its focus on small groups—and for the same reasons. One church I've worked with has just had 25% of their people in

small groups for a number of years, but they want 80% in small groups, so we factored that into their journey—just as Willow Creek, when they were running at 8,000 in small groups, set a long-term goal of 20,000, and within a few years they'd already reached 16,000 in small groups.

We do the same with Family Ministries and Key Community Ministries—setting measurable goals for both so we can *track* their progress, *plan* ahead and *budget* for the higher costs of expanding ministries, and *grow* the leaders we'll need later in the journey. Again, setting measurable goals is just good stewardship and plain common sense.

6. The graphic that captures the broad sweep of the above principles must be stunningly clear and uncluttered.

I mentioned that anyone glancing at your graphic should pick up the journey aspect of your dream, and its broad features, straight away. So in addition to start and finish dates, and the Sunday attendances and ministries you'll prioritise, you'll need the directional arrows (tracks) of the graphics in Leadership Letter 11. But if you add anything further to these details, you risk the overcrowding and clutter that will destroy the impact of your graphic.

One graphic I saw recently, which the church has now wisely abandoned, made that mistake. The graphic was bright, busy and colourful, with nearly a hundred words of detail. But even on a full sheet of A4 paper, it was far too crowded and cluttered, and it took time to work out what the whole thing was about. That graphic would never work!

Keep your graphic clear and uncluttered—with the essential features only.

7. To reach your dream, you must prioritise preaching, or the 'preaching' kind of teaching that focuses on decision and life change, at your main Sunday services—because teaching on its own easily defaults to just passing on information on a Bible passage or topic. By contrast, when we're preaching, or preaching/teaching, we present information with a view to decision and life change—both in seekers, and in believers at every stage of their journey. Generally speaking, we're not remembering this call to decision and life change in our more evangelical churches; so few come to Christ, and few who come to Him ever become the dynamic disciples our churches and nation so desperately need.

To grow your church by conversion growth over the long haul, you absolutely must prioritise preaching, or teaching that focuses on life change, in your services—just as Paul advised Timothy to 'preach the word' and 'be urgent' in doing it (2 Tim 4.2 RSV). So, yes, be very urgent!

8. Finally, to reach your dream, you must have enough teachable and increasingly competent leaders (including the pastor) to carry your plan through.

If, as John Maxwell says, 'Everything rises and falls on leadership', you'll need a critical mass of competent and teachable leaders if you're to reach your dream. Spontaneous growth rarely happens; it's almost always the consequence of doing certain things—and its leaders that make it happen. So put huge focus and effort into finding and growing the leaders you'll need for your new journey.

Indeed, if I led a church today, I'd assess every person I knew in terms of leadership—and if they showed any spark of leadership, I'd fan that spark into flame and help them find the ministry they'd excel in.

Your dream may be brilliant, but without leaders to make it happen, it'll stay that—just a dream!

So to sum up, if you've done your strategic planning along the lines of Letters 10 and 11, you must capture the essence (though not necessarily the fine print) of these eight principles to have any chance of success.

This is the Key Principles Test.

The Probabilities Test

The second test takes all this one stage further. Having pinpointed the principles your plan needs to cover, and assessed whether you've included them, you're now ready to see how well you've covered each of them. This is the Probabilities Test, which, barring a disaster like leadership immorality or false teaching entering the church, will give you an accurate guide as to how likely your plan is to succeed.

It works like this.

There are eight principles—each with a possible score of 12. So as $8 \times 12 = 96$, out of a possible score of 100, it leaves four bonus points. Giving yourself those four points as a starter, grade yourself for each of the principles to gauge the likelihood of your plan's success.

Ask yourself how strong the sense of journey is in your plan—and especially your graphic? Has your plan, and especially your graphic, captured a clear start and finish? Have you captured the key growth indicators at the start and finish of your journey—and at the crucial stages in between? Does the strategic thrust of your plan prioritise the front and back doors of your church? Does each main ministry or focus have measurable goals? Is your graphic, which you'll use frequently as a PowerPoint slide, stunningly clear and uncluttered? Does your plan indicate that you'll prioritise preaching, or teaching that focuses on life change, at your main Sunday services? And have you planned to find and grow the leaders you'll need to reach your dream?

Add up your score, and barring catastrophes, you'll learn from this further test how likely your dream is to come true—and what changes, if any, you may need to make to reach it.

Testing Your New Church Dream!

Bob, those are my suggestions for testing your new church dream.

And broadly speaking, they're very relevant to any planning exercise—even if you use a very different planning method than the one I outlined in Letters 10 and 11.

Think how hard it would be to grow your church if you didn't have any sense of journey. Imagine how confused people would be if they couldn't work out where you started and finished—and there weren't any growth indicators to help them understand what was happening. Think what would happen if you didn't pay much attention to Sundays and didn't take small groups seriously. Consider how your main ministries would go if no one held the leaders to account for what they were doing. Imagine how effective your graphic would be if it was crammed with imagery and detail (as some are). Think how boring sermons would become if they frequently defaulted to just passing on information – as many tend to. And

estimate your chances of success if you didn't bother to find and grow the leaders you'll need in the future. The point is obvious—the principles I've covered are just the basics we've got to do well, no matter what planning method we use.

All I've done is give the principles very sharp focus to maximise your chance of success—because I've found over many years that the sharper our focus is, the more likely we are to reach our dream.

May God bless you as you go forward with your new dream, may He give you favour with your people, and may you have the joy of seeing your dream come true. We're praying for you - in the spirit of Psalm 20.4-5.

Goodbye!

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To discuss at leaders meetings

1. How well does your present strategic plan capture the eight principles I've discussed—and what was your overall score?
2. Which principles have you overlooked in your plan and what steps will you now take to include them—and to strengthen those that didn't score well?
3. And remembering that vision dies in 30 days, what steps will you and your leaders now take to keep your new dream alive in people's hearts so you all reach your dream?