

Who are you and what are you doing here?

(Unity in Vision)

About 350 years ago a ship full of travelers landed on the northeast coast of America. The first year they established a town site. The next year they elected a town government. The third year the town government planned to build a road five miles westward into the wilderness. In the fourth year the people tried to impeach their town government because they thought it was a waste of public funds to build a road five miles westward into the wilderness. Who needed to go there anyway?

Here were people who had the vision to see three thousand miles across an ocean and overcome great hardships to get there. But in just a few years they were not able to see even five miles out of town. They had lost their pioneering vision. With a clear and united vision of what we can become in Christ, no ocean of difficulty is too great. Without it, we rarely move beyond our current boundaries.

God has a plan for this church and it is not for this church to grow. It may not be for us to increase in numbers, to get a bigger building, neither to add more programs and volunteers nor to raise more money. That is not God's plan. God's plan is for this church to be healthy. As we get healthier then there will be growth, spiritual growth, more people will come, our building size will increase (oh we have physical needs now which are being addressed but I talking further in the future), they will be a need for more programs and volunteers (who will be here) and more money will be raised.

Church health is vital. And one common theme that characterizes healthy churches is a clear and distinct vision.

George Barna, who has done a significant amount of work and research in the health and growth of churches states:

"In everyone 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."

Basically he is saying that churches with an agreed upon vision are healthy and therefore, growing.

Now before I jump into the topic of Vision I want to remind us of 2 things:

1. Who we are.

Eph. 1:22-23 says this about Jesus, "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

We are Christ's body. To put it another way, we are the presence of Christ on the earth. Paul often uses the body analogy to speak about the church. In 1 Cor. 12 which we studied last year, Paul speaks of the interconnectedness of the body, how each parts needs the others, how we function together, how we all feel the hurt if one part is injured and so on. We are the body of Jesus and we are his presence here.

When I talk about the church and its' vision do not misunderstand me by thinking I am only referring to Sunday mornings.

Sunday mornings are vital to the health of the body. I envision it as the times in which Jesus went off on his own or with only a few disciples in order to pray and to hear from God. To rest and be refreshed. To heal the parts of the body which are hurting and to celebrate the victories of what God has been doing. It is like a conscious “fast” from all the other distractions, to take the focus off of us and to put the focus on God.

But we are so much more than that: Youth, clubs, meetings, Sunday school, small groups, music practices, informal conversations, helping out neighbours and the like. These all make up a huge part of who this body is and how this body is the presence of Christ.

2. All churches share a common purpose.

Matt 28:18-20 – Then Jesus came to them and said “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matt 22:37-39 – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...Love your neighbour as yourself.”

This command and commission was given to all the churches. It defines the purpose of the church which is to express the presence of God on the earth and we do this by loving God, loving others and making disciples.

So this answers our question of who we are and what are we doing here, so what’s the importance of saying we have a vision.

We have a universal mission and a universal command so the question for vision is this “How is KEMC going to do this in our time and place?” What is our part in fulfilling the Great Commission?

A vision statement is a verbal expression of how our particular congregation will carry out the universal purpose and mission.

Let me give you an example of the importance of discovering our vision. Look at the apostle Paul. When he was called by God in Acts 9 God said about him, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” Acts 9:15

Paul was clearly to be used to fulfill the great commission through bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. So when he planned his journeys they were to large Gentile centres in order to preach to them. Compare this with Peter whose ministry was mainly to the Jewish communities. Both shared the same universal mission but each had a unique vision as to how they were to fulfill it.

Vision is the tension that exists between what is and what could be. It dares to dream big dreams about the future. It is about asking God what he is up to in our community and then joining Him in doing it.

Vision requires us to look at who we were and how it has shaped us into who we are today followed by allowing God to reveal to us who it is we are to become as we share in His vision for us. We need all types of people to help us in this process. People who know the past, realists who can recognize strengths and weaknesses and visionaries who can see what could be.

We value the past because it gives us insight into who we are in the present. But our focus is not there. Once we are aware of who we are our focus turns to the future to discover who God wants us to become. That's the beginning of casting a vision.

Some of you will remember that I handed out a short survey about 8 months ago. It asked you to pick the best words to describe what we at KEMC value. The ministerial has since taken your results and put together a list of the top 8 which we believe you as a congregation have told us, "This is who we are."

Now that we have a sense of who we are and what we value we can put this before God and ask. "Who are you calling us to become? God give us Your dreams and visions for our future." And we will be asking you to join us in dreaming, in putting together a vision for our church.

We need to agree about who we are in order to work together in unity to further God's kingdom. Every part is significant and every person has a role to play.

Why does KEMC need a vision statement? Here are 3 reasons:

1. Vision gets us on God's program and off our own.

The only way we can develop a vision statement is by seeking God. Prayer is where it all begins. Sometimes we let the budget process, a crisis or some significant change drive our plans when in fact, God wants to reveal a future that will excite and challenge us. But this is going to require prayerful listening.

Prov. 29:18 says "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained."

When we have nothing to focus our work toward, we can allow all kind of distractions to take precedence over what God is calling us to do. Having a clear vision puts a compass in our hands giving us insight into the decisions we have to make. It helps us to stay as a body. Not a hand going this way or a foot going the other way. Not out of control going every which way but focused on the same path.

2. Vision gets people into the game.

With a shared vision, people see themselves not just as another congregant or a "pew warmer" but as a vital part of a church that is having a powerful impact on a lost and dying world. They are not simply in a church; they are on a mission.

It can change a maintenance mentality into a ministry mentality. People get excited to become involved. To approach ministry with a sense of excitement and anticipation as they witness what God can do through them. Sometimes we will know exactly how to accomplish parts of the vision and other times we won't. Ministry will become an exciting adventure into the world of the unknown.

And the motivation will be there to do ministry with excellence. Now do not confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence means being prepared, not winging it, looking to do our best not haphazardly throwing something together. But we will not require perfection. I firmly believe that the church should be the greatest place on earth for people to try and fail. We need to encourage each other to try, encourage the young to express their gifts, to be a safe place to experiment and have things not quite work out well. If we demand perfection then we make the gospel unattainable for everyone, including ourselves. It takes courage to say, "I'll try to co-teach a class to see if it something that God is gifting in."

The shared excitement of a clear vision encourages people to step up and try. We may attempt something for Christ and it may not work, or we may attempt something else and it may work. The risks are great but so is the God we serve, and the vision he will give us.

Hebrews 11:23-24 – “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”

Excitement is contagious, as God works through the ministries we have toward a common vision the excitement level of being active will resonate throughout the church. It will be an encouragement to each of us to get involved, to stay involved. To work through the tough times and avoid discouragement as we see the large picture of God working.

3. Vision encourages unity

In a ministry a shared vision changes people's relationships to one another. The title of the church now moves from “the church” to “our church.” It creates a desire to work together to accomplish a shared vision. It gives significance to the relationships. “We need each other if anything significant is going to happen for Christ.

Look at the passage that was read for us from Romans 12.

There are so many passages that speak to the need for unity in the church. But I believe in Romans 12 we get a glimpse of how that unity would look in a church that shares a common vision.

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”

What a beautiful picture of a united body of believers all reaching for the same vision given to them by God. Covered in prayer they strive to serve the Lord together making allowances for one another's weaknesses and being sure to put each other's needs ahead of their own. Later on Paul again encourages them to live in harmony with one another, to not be proud.

In living in such a way it enables them as a body to minister to each other and to those around them. It gives the strength to bless those who persecute, to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. To be able to open their doors to those around them who are in need.

This shared vision gives us the ability to look at that which causes us tension and to humbly put our own wants aside. Tension such as music, enough workers, space concerns, traditional values or relevance, to name a few. A unified vision points us in the right direction and can help prevent possible conflict and hesitation towards new ministry ideas.

Let me illustrate with an example of a real need.

We have been talking about needing more space for Sunday School and C.E. Well I need to add to that list. Friday night we had our kickoff event for Jr. Youth. We went to a local corn maze. I thought, first night, corn maze, it will probably be like last year when we had 50-60 kids then the numbers will taper off and we'll be squeezing 40-45 kids in the basement for our regular events. Well we had about 80 kids show up. Thankfully we were only going to a local corn maze a few miles away and a few extra parents arrived to help with driving. But my next thought was. How many will come each week to the church and where will we put them? What a great problem to have but still a real problem.

Already last year, when we were still quite large, I had been dreaming and seeking God and trying to develop a vision for the youth programs here. I had thought to myself, "oh wouldn't it be great to have a big empty building in town that could become the community youth center, with couches, and tables and a stage, etc. etc."

But this is where the struggle lies. Does my dream fit with the vision of the church? Am I going to be running off and doing things that go against that which we value and that which we feel God has given us a vision for. By the way I'm not.

But without a united vision the leaders of our different ministries can dream but they feel disjointed. Are they alone? Do others share their vision? Having a united vision gives a direction to face and we can line up our dreams to evaluate if they fit.

Lastly though there is one thing that we need to keep in mind.

4. Having a united vision will cost

There will need to be sacrifices made. If I truly believe in the vision that this church has then I will be willing to make personal sacrifices. It could be with my time, it could be with my finances, it could be with my pride and sense of entitlement as I put the needs of others first. But I believe that if I truly agree with the vision that I will gladly make those sacrifices.

The church as a whole may also need to make sacrifices. We will be required to look at all we do and discern whether they fit with our vision. If they do then we will need to pursue them with all our heart. If they don't we may need to let some stuff go. This could refer to things this church has been doing a certain way for years. It could mean giving up ideas that are new for ideas that better fit our vision.

So where does this leave us now.

Like I said earlier the ministerial has been working with the information this congregation gave it through our last survey. We have been spending time in prayer and discussing vision and looking at examples. We are again asking the congregation to get involved.

In the next couple of weeks you will be receiving in your mailboxes a sheet with some vision ideas on it as well as value statements. What we are asking is for your input.

First we are asking you to pray. Pray for God to give you a heart for this church, pray that He gives you dreams and wisdom as we work through this process.

Recognize what your role is in this body. Are you the person who knows the past, who understands the reasons behind decisions, who can offer wisdom and insight as to how we became the church we are today. Are you a realist, who can clearly evaluate our present situation, who can find the strengths and weakness which can be addressed? Or are you a visionary, do you see in your mind the church God could be calling us to become, of what we could be? We need all of your insights in order to be united in this process.

Next, we are asking you to edit. Make changes, dream, and give ideas and suggestions so that we can move forward in discerning the vision God has. Ask questions, we are by no means experts but together I believe we can work through this.

Thirdly, we are asking you to trust. Once we have received the input from the congregation we are asking you to trust and pray for the leadership as they take all this and work to find a unified statement which will then be brought to you for the final decision.

This is an exciting time for this church. I can't wait to see how God is going to move throughout this church. In Acts 2, following Pentecost, Peter addresses the crowd and quotes from Joel 2 "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams."

We are still in those last days, the days before Jesus returns. Let's pray that God continues to give us dreams and visions as to the future he has for us.