Developing a Vision for Ministry

Aubrey Malphurs on what a vision is, where it comes from, and how a church carries it from dream to reality

> *"I define a vision as a clear, exciting picture of the future of a ministry, such as a church, that God uses to motivate that ministry to accomplish its mission."*
>
> Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry*, 3rd ed.

The book in brief

Malphurs has spent decades teaching leadership at Dallas Theological Seminary and consulting with churches. This third edition (2015) of a book first published in 1992 is a practical manual that follows a vision through its whole life: why a church needs one, what it is, who develops it, how it's born, how it's communicated, how it's implemented and how it's kept alive when people get discouraged. His starting point is sobering. By his reckoning nine out of ten American churches are plateaued or declining, and one major reason is that "they and their leadership have little or no vision." In the foreword Haddon Robinson sets the tone: strong leaders hold "a vision as great as God and as specific as a zip code."

Why a church needs a vision

Malphurs gives eleven reasons. A vision:

- clarifies direction
- invites unity
- helps a ministry function
- strengthens leadership
- prompts passion
- encourages risk taking
- sustains people through hard times
- creates energy
- provides purpose
- encourages giving
- motivates the congregation

His warning about a "maintenance mentality," where people go through the motions week after week, is aimed especially at smaller churches.

What a vision is, and what it isn't

Malphurs separates vision from five terms often used in its place. A **dream** is broader and comes first; dreams fuel visions. **Goals and objectives** come after a vision and belong to the strategic plan. A **purpose** says why a ministry exists. A **mission** says what it's supposed to do. The vision is a picture of that mission accomplished. He sums up the mission–vision difference in eight contrasts:

	MISSION	VISION
What it is	A statement	A snapshot

	MISSION	VISION
Where it's used	Planning	Communication
Length	Short, one sentence	Short or long, up to several pages
What it does	Informs	Excites
Activity	Doing	Seeing
Source	The head	The heart
Experience	Intellectual	Emotional
Development	Science (taught)	Art (caught)

A vision has four marks: it's **clear** (people can explain it to someone else), **exciting**, a **mental picture** and about the **future**. Two more essentials sit underneath. A vision **can be**: it's big but feasible, sized by the leader, the people and the times. And it **must be**: the leader believes God is in it and can't rest until the church is moving toward it. Short-term visions are eventually realized; long-term visions are always in the process of becoming.

Who develops the vision

Malphurs puts the first responsibility on the **point person**, usually the senior pastor, whose role he describes as vision cultivator, vision caster and vision clarifier. But he insists equally on the **people of influence**, the "driving wheels" on the board, the staff and in ministries of every kind. They need to "get their fingerprints all over the vision," because people commit to what they helped shape. He recommends including representatives of every group, "women as well as men and youth as well as adults."

How a vision is born

A vision is conceived when a leader feels either **dissatisfaction with the status quo** or the pull of an **untapped opportunity**. Its source is ultimately God. Sometimes He gives it directly, as with Nehemiah, who spoke of "what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:12). More often He works indirectly, through what a leader reads, hears and experiences. Malphurs then offers a six-step "general method" for developing it:

1. **Envisioning prayer.** Deliberate, regular prayer about the vision itself, alone, with leaders and with the wider church. He suggests a full day away once a month or once a quarter.
2. **Thinking big.** "Small visions do not motivate." Most churches err on the side of too little vision, not too much.
3. **Written brainstorming.** Get every idea on paper before judging any of them.
4. **Determining the contents.** Vision statements commonly draw on a church's purpose, mission, values, strategy, people and location.
5. **Determining the length.** A sentence, a page or several pages, whatever fits the church.
6. **Questioning the dream.** Is it clear? Exciting? Can people picture it? Is it about the future? Does it move people toward the mission?

He adds three other routes: **expand the mission statement** by running it through the people and community a church is trying to reach and asking what it will look like there; **study other churches' vision statements** (the

appendix collects many); and **dream big dreams**. A church only has a vision, he warns, when most of its people are excited about it and it's moving them to make disciples.

Communicating the vision

Everyone casts the vision: the primary leader most of all, then other leaders, then the people themselves. The message has to be understood, and Malphurs notes it usually lands in one of two contexts, a **problem** that needs solving or an **opportunity** waiting to be seized. It also has to be credible, which depends on the leader's track record, the content of the vision and the leader's integrity. The audience includes both the church and those outside it. His counsel: live the vision before you preach it, know your audience, tell stories, and speak positively and with conviction. For smaller churches he advises three to five communication channels done well instead of many done poorly.

Implementing the vision

Good vision casting doesn't guarantee change; otherwise the vision becomes "a recurring item on a board's monthly agenda." Implementation depends on two things, the leader's skill with people and the followers' ability to work as a team. Malphurs walks through building a team (commitment and cooperation grown through trust, shared life, open communication and resolving conflict), empowering it (a secure identity in Christ, confidence in each person's gifts, servant leadership, delegation and modeling) and encouraging it by recognizing individuals and celebrating together.

Keeping the vision alive

The final chapter is candid about discouragement. Some of it comes from people: **vision vampires** who oppose change as if it were heresy, **vision vultures** who pick the vision apart piece by piece, and **vision firemen**, leaders who put out every new fire for the sake of order. Some comes from failure, fear, fatigue and frustration. His remedies are pastoral: remember the Lord's goodness in the past, present and future; ask God for strength; hang on; encourage others; spend time with other visionary leaders; and meet privately with opponents, in the spirit of Matthew 18:15, to understand and resolve differences.

How it could serve The Way Ahead

1. **Keep the four pieces distinct.** Malphurs's mission–vision table is the clearest tool we have for keeping our statements from blurring together. Our plan already follows him: a one-sentence mission, and a vision with a sentence, a one-page description and a first-year focus. Put the table in front of the writing team in April.
2. **Run the vision through our five towns.** His "expand the mission" method fits Session 4 and Town hall 3: take the draft mission and ask what it will look like when it reaches Saranac, Lake Odessa, Clarksville, Ionia and Lowell. The picture that forms is the raw material of the vision.
3. **Use the vision audit on every draft.** Clear, exciting, picturable, future-focused, mission-driving, plus "can be" and "must be." These make good questions for the May comment period and for the LBA before it decides.
4. **Practice envisioning prayer, not only general prayer.** Our plan already builds in a great deal of prayer. Malphurs would add that some of it should be about the vision itself: specific requests for wisdom, for the vision community and for the leaders.

5. **Put many fingerprints on it.** Make sure youth, women and men, longtime members and newcomers all have a seat somewhere in the process, especially at the town halls.

6. **Choose our channels.** Pathway now has a bulletin, newsletter, website, slides, podcast, Instagram and texting. Following his advice for smaller churches, pick the three to five that will carry the vision every month after Vision Sunday and do those well.

7. **Frame it as opportunity.** We can present The Way Ahead in either of his two contexts. Naming real problems is honest, but the five towns are an opportunity, and that framing invites hope instead of defensiveness.

8. **Expect resistance and handle it face to face.** Plan now to meet privately, listen first and look for what's right in an objection.

Reading with discernment

A leader-centered model meets a church-wide process. Malphurs places the vision first with the point person and is openly skeptical of shared leadership. Our process deliberately asks the whole church to discern together, in the spirit of "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). The two can fit: the pastor cultivates, casts and clarifies, while the church and the LBA weigh and own what's discerned.

Watch the Trinity analogy. To support single-leader headship, Malphurs calls God the Father "the primary leader, the point person" in the Trinity. Wesleyans confess with the historic creeds that the three persons are equal in power and glory. The case for a clear primary leader on a team stands on practical grounds and doesn't need that analogy.

Personality tools are aids, not tests. He uses MBTI and DISC to spot visionary temperaments. They can help, but God also gives steady, careful people (the "S" and "C" types he says prefer the status quo) to keep a vision faithful once it's adopted.

Careful with the labels. "Vampires, vultures and firemen" are memorable, but in a church where people have shared life for decades, labels can harden into dismissal. Some objections turn out to be wisdom. Malphurs's own remedy, a private conversation that starts by listening, is the better guide.

Big and specific. "Think big" can sound like a call to imitate large churches. Robinson's line is the better measure for us: a vision as great as God and as specific as our zip codes. For a rural church, faithfulness may look like a vision sized to five towns that God makes bigger than we expected.

TALK IT THROUGH

1. Using Malphurs's table, how is a mission different from a vision? Which do you find easier to put into words, and why?
2. Are we more stirred by a problem to solve or an opportunity to seize? What's the problem, and what's the opportunity?
3. Picture Pathway ten years from now if God answers our prayers. What do you see in our five towns?

Source: Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry*, 3rd ed. (Baker Books, 2015).