The Power of Vision

George Barna on discovering God's vision for a church, and what it asks of a pastor and a people

> *"Vision for ministry is a clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God to His chosen servants and is based upon an accurate understanding of God, self and circumstances."*
>
> George Barna, *The Power of Vision*

The book in brief

George Barna founded the research firm now called The Barna Group. He first published this book in 1992 and revised it in 2003 and 2009, drawing on what he calls more than 200,000 interviews with Christians, pastors and leaders. His diagnosis is blunt: in his research, "not even 1 out of every 10 pastors of Protestant churches can articulate God's vision for their church," and most churches have little impact on their communities as a result. The book argues that vision isn't a management technique a pastor invents. It's God's own picture of what He wants to accomplish through a particular church, received through prayer, Scripture and an honest look at one's self and circumstances, then shared until the whole church owns it.

Barna unpacks his definition piece by piece. A vision is a **clear mental image**, a **preferable** future that requires change, focused on the **future**, **imparted by God** and given to a **chosen leader**. It rests on three kinds of understanding: of God, of oneself and of one's circumstances.

Vision is not mission

This is one of the book's most useful chapters. In Barna's terms a **mission** is "a broad, general statement about who you wish to reach and what the church hopes to accomplish." It's philosophical, and many churches could share the same wording: "to know Him and make Him known," "to evangelize, exalt, edify and equip." A **vision** is "specific, detailed, customized, distinctive and unique to a given church." It lets a leader say no to opportunities, gives direction and moves people to act. "The vision statement puts feet on the mission." His test is practical: if a statement could belong to any church, or if you can make ministry decisions without ever consulting it, it's a mission statement, however it's labeled.

Twenty myths about vision

Barna's longest chapter corrects twenty common misunderstandings. A selection:

#	THE MYTH	BARNA'S REALITY
1	Vision comes from consensus among key leaders.	"Vision is not the result of consensus; it should result in consensus."
7	The goal of vision is numerical growth.	The goal is to glorify God.

#	THE MYTH	BARNA'S REALITY
8	If the pastor has the vision, the people will be swept along.	Vision has no power until it spreads from the visionary to everyone else.
9	Copy another respected leader's vision.	A "me too" vision shows neither God's leading nor real leadership.
11	Churches in one community should share a vision.	Each church's vision should be its own.
12	If it's truly God's vision, it will come quickly.	God's vision isn't bound by our timetable.
14	Others have no role in developing the vision.	Godly people serve as a sounding board throughout.
15	A catchy slogan is the best way to communicate it.	Too much emphasis on a slogan does harm.
16	A struggling church may be called only to hold steady.	"Encouraging people to pledge themselves to survival is an admission of defeat."
19	A church needs a new vision every couple of years.	"Vision usually outlasts the visionary."

Capturing God's vision

Barna describes four components, and he's clear that the process takes time, sometimes days, often many months.

1. **Know yourself.** A long set of hard questions for the leader: what stirs you and what makes you cry, your gifts and fears, the passages that speak loudest to you, the sins you commit most often, the people you're naturally drawn to serve.
2. **Know your ministry environment.** Your *community* (its demographics, attitudes, values, beliefs, lifestyles and felt needs), your *colleagues*, your *congregation* and your *competition*. The competition, he insists, isn't other churches. It's television, sleeping late, sports leagues, hobbies and family activities, and the reasons people choose them over church.
3. **Know God.** Study the Word, rethink prayer (being a willing vessel instead of placing requests) and practice fasting, which he calls "one of the basic disciplines that God wants leaders to practice today."
4. **Verify the vision.** "In the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14, NKJV). Wise counselors don't frame the vision, he says, but they help make sure the leader has truly heard God and hasn't softened what God asked.

What God's vision looks like

Barna lists its marks: it's inspiring, change-oriented, challenging, empowering, long-term, customized, detailed and people-oriented, and it reveals a promising future. He names twelve benefits a church gains, among them continuity with the past, direction, greater commitment, change people can accept, a filter for opportunities, confidence, loyalty and efficiency. And he names six **vision killers**: **tradition** (though he grants that God uses traditions as a bridge between past and future), **fear**, **stereotypes** (assumptions about what people want that turn out to be false), **complacency**, **fatigue** and **short-term thinking**.

Articulating and sharing the vision

Barna wants the vision written down, owned and kept short. Give people the larger picture with all its detail, but limit the document they'll focus on to a single paragraph. "Leaders who cannot capture the essence of the vision within three sentences probably have not clarified it in their own minds." A good statement names the people a church is called to reach, the purpose it serves in their lives and what makes the church distinctive in its area, usually in "no more than five or six crucial thoughts." He warns against slogans that substitute for substance.

Then the vision has to "trickle down." Use every channel: sermons, printed pieces, letters, teaching and meetings. Don't surprise the congregation with a finished statement. Recruit **multiple vision casters**, because "if the pastor is the only individual who is promoting the vision, the church will not become a vision-driven entity." Build the vision into how programs are evaluated, so it becomes a standard rather than a slogan.

Counting the cost

Barna is frank that the process can be lonely and exhausting, that some people won't welcome the change and a few may leave, and that leaders should expect spiritual opposition. A closing chapter invites every Christian to seek a personal vision for their own life and ministry and to live it out within the vision of their church. Appendixes include a study guide, his firm's own mission and vision, and seven steps for church marketing, starting with gathering and analyzing information about the community.

How it could serve The Way Ahead

1. **Use his test to keep mission and vision apart.** If a draft could hang in any church in our five towns, it's a mission statement. Our mission can sound like other churches'; our vision shouldn't. Pathway prays every week for another Gospel-focused church nearby, and Barna's myth 11 sharpens the point: God isn't asking us to duplicate the church down the road. What is He asking of Pathway in particular?
2. **Bring his three questions to Session 4 and Town hall 3.** What kind of people is Pathway called to serve? What purpose has God called us to serve in their lives? What makes Pathway distinctive in our area? The answers are the core of a vision.
3. **Lead with one paragraph.** Our plan calls for a vision sentence, a one-page description and a first-year focus. Barna would have the one-page description open with a single paragraph of five or six thoughts that anyone could summarize, with the rest of the page filling in the picture.
4. **Study our "competition" honestly at Town hall 2.** In our setting that might mean travel sports, hunting season, Sunday work shifts and a well-earned day off. Knowing why people choose them is part of knowing our community.
5. **Use his "know yourself" questions in the pastor's week of prayer.** Barna's questions fit Pastor Bart's week of prayer (December 13–19), and a shorter set could serve Vision Team members during their fourteen days.
6. **Ask outside counselors to test the drafts.** Before the LBA decides in May, invite one or two wise voices from outside Pathway, such as a trusted pastor elsewhere in The Wesleyan Church, to read the drafts and say what they see.

7. **Raise up many vision casters.** After Vision Sunday, every LBA member and ministry leader should be able to tell the vision in their own words. The teaser slide, announcement and blog post already avoid the surprise announcement Barna warns against.

8. **Invite personal visions.** After June, a Life Group study could help people ask how God is calling them personally within the church's vision.

Reading with discernment

"Not the result of consensus." Barna's definition locates vision with a chosen leader, and myth 1 says consensus should follow vision, not produce it. Our process deliberately invites the whole church to pray and listen together, as in Acts 15:28. The two can fit. A pastor carries real responsibility to seek God and lead, and Barna himself (myth 14) wants godly people testing the vision throughout. But a church also tests what its leaders believe they've heard. Scripture tells all believers to "test them all" (1 Thessalonians 5:21), and the Wesleyan tradition has long valued holy conferencing for that reason.

Hold "God's vision" with humility. Calling a statement God's vision can make honest disagreement sound like disobedience. Our drafts are our best discernment of God's leading, offered in faith and open to correction.

Survival and faithfulness. Barna's myth 16 is a fair warning against settling for maintenance. It can also wound faithful people in small churches who have held on through hard years. Faithfulness in a hard season isn't defeat; it's often what makes a new season possible.

Those who leave. Barna tells leaders not to fret when people leave over a new vision. Pastorally we'd want more care than that: listen, bless and stay in touch with anyone who walks away.

Marketing language and dated data. Barna writes as a researcher and marketer, speaking of "products" and "competition." The questions are useful; the gospel isn't a product. His statistics come from his own firm and from 2003–2009, so treat them as signs of a trend, not current measurements.

Next to Malphurs. The two agree that mission and vision differ and that vision begins with the leader. They differ on length: Malphurs allows a vision of several pages, while Barna insists on one paragraph. Our plan can honor both with a short core and a fuller page behind it.

TALK IT THROUGH

1. Read a mission statement from another church aloud. Could it be ours? What would make a vision unmistakably Pathway's?
2. What competes with church for the people in our five towns, and why do they choose it?
3. Which of Barna's six vision killers is the biggest risk for us: tradition, fear, stereotypes, complacency, fatigue or short-term thinking?

Source: George Barna, *The Power of Vision: Discover and Apply God's Plan for Your Life and Ministry*, rev. ed. (Baker Books, 2014; first published 1992).