

Introduction

A commentator on church life and growth has stated that a church must function well as a cause, a community and a corporation (organisation). Vision casting is an exercise in examining how the community we call church can promote its cause, which is Christ, through an informed, invigorated and intentional corporate plan.

Around fifty people gathered together to spend two hours engaging in a series of exercises designed to help answer three crucial questions:

Where are we as a church fellowship?

Where would we like to be in 5 years?

What will be our priorities for the next year to eighteen months?

The Method

The four exercises participants were asked to engage in were as follows:

A Snapshot of Garnerville – By agreeing a score on 14 statements about various aspects of church the six groups assessed church life as it is presently.

Dreaming Dreams – Setting aside the questions of finance and personnel the groups were asked to dream their dreams for Garnerville and how the Church might look in five years time.

SWOT Analysis – By examining the **S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities and **T**hreats the groups were encouraged to think about the internal and external nature of being and doing church in the 21st century in East Belfast.

First Priority – As a final task groups were asked to return to their dream sheet and identify the one dream they would like to see addressed as top priority.

Comment 1: Purpose & Participation

There was a very high level of participation and a great deal of sharing and listening took place within the groups and in plenary feedback times as well. The exercise was clearly valuable in helping members to appreciate a wide and varied range of opinions and perceptions about many facets of church life.

The purpose of the event was to engage members in a process of assessing the present state of church; asking what is good and what needs to be done better and addressing what the key priorities for the future might be.

This report attempts to capture the key points of the discussion but there will be many aspects of individual group discussions that will not be reflected in this piece of writing. It is therefore important that everyone engaged in the process on March 1st continues to reflect and respond to this and subsequent reports and plans as they emerge over the coming months.

Vision is not the prerogative of one or some but everyone together seeking God's will and purpose. In 1 Chronicles 28 David the King, shared the vision and plans for building a temple for God. In the very next chapter the chronicler reports that the people responded with joy and gave willingly to provide the resources to make the vision and plans for the temple a reality. Together with a God-given vision the people and the leaders achieved more than they thought possible.

Almost fifty years ago Garnerville was born as a fledgling congregation. With a vision from God and the commitment of people and leaders a church was planted and has grown to its present size and state. With such a significant landmark ahead, the diamond jubilee, the time is right and ripe for a fresh vision and a renewed commitment by leaders and people.

During the feedback sessions it was noted that Garnerville was in a season of transition. This process of vision casting recognises that but it also challenges participants and the church as a whole to examine every ministry of the church to discern whether it needs a face-lift, an overhaul or a funeral – the necessary pruning to make room for future growth.

Assessment 1: A Snapshot of Garnerville

The following grid outlines the statements on church life considered, the scores from each individual group and the average score.

STATEMENT	GROUP \Rightarrow	1	2	3	4	5	6	AVERAGE
Our worship meets our deepest need		3	3	3	3	3	4	3
Prayer for one another and the world is a significant feature of our church life		3	2	2	4	2	3	2.5
There is an effective pastoral system that includes everyone in the church		2	2	2	2.5	3	1	2
Each person's spiritual growth is a priority		1.5	3	4	3	4	3	3
We are good at communicating in the church		4	2.5	3	1	3	3	2.5
Children are cared for as the Church of today		3	3	4	4	2	3	3
Teenagers feel at home in the church		3	2	3	3	3	3	3
Our church buildings are "user friendly"		3	3	4	1	4	4	3
We have clear points of ministry outside the church		1	2	2	2	1	1	1.5
Leading others to faith is an important factor in this church		1.5	3	2	2	3	4	2.5
Our weekly giving adequately covers our expenditure		2	2	3	2	3	1	2
We are implementing a planned mission policy		3	1	4	1	3	1	2
We have strong partnerships with other churches		2	4	3	1	4	3	3
We have the resources to extend our mission		1	2	4	1	4	2	2

Comment 2: Highs and Lows

There were six areas that scored highly – worship; spiritual growth; care of children; teen friendly; user friendly buildings and partnership with other churches.

Conclusions On High Scores

- (i) This is a family orientated church where children and young people are accepted, involved and valued
- (ii) Worship and nurturing of personal faith are key characteristics and these aspects of church life are not only appreciated but acknowledged
- (iii) The buildings are viewed by the vast majority as fit for purpose and user friendly
- (iv) Relationships with other churches are strong and this is recognised by a majority of participants

Three areas were scored just above average at 2.5 – prayer, communication and leading others to faith.

Conclusions on Above Average Scores

- (i) Taken positively this suggests that as a fellowship communication is equally focussed on God, each other and those searching or seeking for God
- (ii) On the negative side there is scope to improve communication at all levels. Only one group viewed prayer as a very significant feature of church life.
- (iii) Communicating within church is clearly something of a 'hit and miss' affair as the range of scores indicates
- (iv) Leading others to faith also had a wide range of scores suggesting either a lack of experience of the effectiveness of such

communication or a perception that it is not a key factor in church life

Four areas scored about average - pastoral care; mission policy; weekly giving and resources to extend mission

Conclusions on Average Scores

- (i) Pastoral care and mission policy relate to two crucial areas of church life. Looking after and supporting church members is a vital part of being a caring, loving community of God's people. The implication of the scores given by the groups is that the current system is recognised to be deficient in delivering the care for everyone that commitment to Christ demands.

The mission policy or lack thereof – half the groups indicated by their scores that it was not a reality as far as they were concerned – must require serious and urgent attention. Mission is an intentional activity and it requires focus, faith and fortitude!

- (ii) On the question of finances there is a clear sense that as a church there is a struggle to make ends meet and this assessment most probably explains the corresponding assessment that resources to extend mission are few and far between. However the range of scores on this statement reveals that some groups believe the resources will be there and the key is to believe and put faith into action

One statement stood out as the absolute low – ministry outside the church. While half the groups scored this as average the other half scored it as lowest of all.

Conclusion on Lowest Score

Here is the key priority for church life. Community transformation is why God created the church in the first place. Long gone are the days when people flocked into church buildings of their own accord. We live in changed times and the onus is on the church to engage with the community

in the community. Principally this means letting people know how much we care. As one astute commentator put it “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Assessment 2: *Dreaming Dreams*

The following lists are the results of each group’s discussion. The item in bold type is the aspect chosen by each group as their priority as part of Assessment 4 (see below)

Group 1

5 years from now:

Church still here!

Church full – 2 services

More communicants

***More community involvement & open air meetings**

***More outreach**

Less polarised

Coffee shop – no pews

Church furniture should be more practical

Family/youth worker

Utilise the buildings more

Everybody to get more involved

Summer schemes – early start in summer or all year

Group 2

Vibrant growing group of young people

Gospel rock concerts open air & BBQs

More fellowship groups

***ALPHA course**

***People sharing their faith with others without embarrassment**

More get togethers

Drop in centre – open door policy

Coffee shop

Balanced community church

Outreach

Open our homes to each other
Co ordinate lifts to fellowship groups
Our church committed to a village/community overseas
Send and support missionaries –at home & overseas-of all ages

Group 3

***More people – all seats filled every week by e.g. Open days & welcome packs, missions at home**

Even better sound in music
Church family holidays
Mission – home & abroad
Cool fund raisers
Outdoor worship concerts
More people aged 18-40
Better outreach – take it to football pitches, shopping centres, community centres etc.
Summer schemes
Improved website – put it on Google
People handing out leaflets at shops/schools/doctors
More interaction between young & old
Church merchandise

Group 4

Church a bigger part of the community
Dedicated space for each organisation
***More family services – children more involved in the service, because they are the future of our church**
More young people coming to church
Dedicated youth leader
Not just 'Sunday morning' worshippers, making it a 7 day worship
Continual growth of the band/choir

Group 5

Full church/ Christ centred
Boys Brigade/youth
***Fellowship group for young families**
Overseas mission
Extended use of Church facilities
***More involved in Community/outlook**
Electronic communication/billboard

Group 6

A visual presentation of the service sermon

The appointment of personnel (paid appointments) to supervise the work of:

- **Caring for older members**
- **Caring for the youth of the church**

To get the outside community involved in our Church

Less involvement from the media in putting down the Christian church

A church full of young people

Comment 3: Aspiration or Achievable?

All but one group stated that “a full church” was one of their dreams. This is the big picture, big dream that must drive what we do. Yet it cannot be allowed to become the benchmark against which we mark our success or failure. This is a long term goal and can only be achieved if a number of shorter terms goals are identified, addressed and attained.

For example one of the key priorities identified by one group was the need to help people share faith without embarrassment. The Alpha course was mentioned in this regard. This could be the very tool not only to help people share faith but help others connect with faith and through that engage with church and so be part of the longer term goal of a “full church”

One group suggested that creating Welcome Packs and running Open Days might help to connect with the community and draw people into the church. These two ideas are easily achievable. It would be worth noting however that careful thought needs to be given to the material included in the Pack and the format of the Open Day to ensure a) the material is in language non-church people can understand and b) the Open Day helps people to see church as non-threatening, attractive and worthwhile checking out.

Two other groups identified greater community involvement as their first priority. While no specific ideas were noted it might be a useful exercise to survey what other local churches or not so local churches have been doing in this regard. It may also be worthwhile to look at partnership programmes with other churches and Christian agencies.

Two groups highlighted additional staff. Investing in personnel in order to invest in people is a key kingdom principle espoused and exemplified in Jesus ministry and in the approach adopted by Paul. While this will of necessity be

more medium term the ground work should be carried out now. There are options to make use of volunteer workers through the Youth Board (SWIM programme) as well as placement workers training through Belfast Bible College. The impact would be significant and the message to the membership and the wider community would be very powerful. This would say 'People matter to God and people matter to us more than buildings, more than programmes, more than finance'

Assessment 3: SWOT Analysis

The following grid is a composite of all comments made by the six groups. Where items are marked with * indicates the number of groups identifying same issue

STRENGTHS

Welcoming + Caring ***
 Good /Friendly people* ****
 Fun loving teenagers*
 Music – choir & band****
 Enthusiastic*
 FOG & SNOG*
 Child friendly
 Disabled toilets
 Spiritual minister**
 Fellowship groups*
 Range of organisations*
 Wide age range
 Church bus***
 Ramblers
 Feelings of belonging*
 Sense of humour
 Committed volunteers*
 Sound & system
 Encouraging
 Family Tradition
 Good suite of buildings

THREATS

TV**
 Computers/Games consoles
 Sports & hobbies on Sundays***
 Open shops*
 Public houses
 Work patterns
 Peer pressure***
 Parental guidance
 Too much political correctness**
 Too many churches in our area
 Don't sell ourselves
 Busy lives*
 Media

WEAKNESSES

Lack of numbers
 Leaders – lack of numbers
 Congregational gap
 Lack of money*
 Apathy
 Lack of youth organisations
 Communication – Lifts, What's going on, between youth & elderly etc**
 Gaps in organisations – teenagers/young people drop away, do we know why? – 18-40s****
 Outreach – missions
 Praying for others
 Poor balance of sexes**
 Image of the church within the community*
 Accepting change
 Lack of volunteers*
 Lack of involvement in community
 Attendances

OPPORTUNITIES

Location/space around the church*
 Involvement/friendship in the area**
 Going into the area with music etc.
 Musical evening-talents & skills**
 Church picnic/BBQs/Christmas dinners**
 Coffee mornings-for young & old
 Practical help eg. school outreach**
 Banners/visual about Christianity*
 Parenting classes
 Ramblers
 People are looking for answers
 Other community groups
 'Building bridges'/Inter church**

Comment 4: Celebrating, communicating & connecting

The responses reveal many positives. These should be accepted as such, applauded and allowed to instil self-belief as well as God belief. The “Yes we can” with God attitude is vital.

It is very clear that people feel welcomed at Garnerville. Research indicates that people visiting a church service will make up their minds within the first five minutes as to whether or not they will return. In other words it is the welcome and the way in which existing members relate to each other that determines how much people are positively affected by attending a church service. In this regard Garnerville are working well and that needs to be recognised, encouraged and built on.

The worship scored highly on the list of strengths and this is something to be celebrated and developed. While worship in terms of music is not the be all and end all of meeting together with God it can make a huge difference. The overwhelming endorsement of the current arrangements would indicate that worship is both positive and inclusive.

It is one thing to attract people into a church it is another to assimilate them so that they feel connected and have a strong sense of belonging. The comments made with regard to weaknesses highlighted the missing generation identified as 18-40's. This coupled with a poor balance of sexes suggesting there are fewer men than women involved raises the question of participation and a clear sense of purpose and direction.

What is common to both 18-40 age range and to males in general is the need to know the purpose for something. Often the comment is made that young

people lack commitment and men are afraid of commitment. This is a myth. Commitment follows vision. A clear direction with challenging goals grounded in real life will stir a heart desire to get involved. The identification of these weaknesses opens up the way to engage in a dialogue with these two groups and it also presents a challenge to the church to examine the questions “Why are we here? What are we doing?”

On the question of threats three main issues stood out attitude to Sunday, peer pressure and political correctness. In other words society is changing. We no longer live in a Christian society but something akin to a post-Christian society. This is reflected in the vast array of activities now available on a Sunday. No longer can the church claim a monopoly on people’s time on a Sunday. This threat is also a challenge to engage in radical thinking about how church organises itself and responds to a changing world.

Just as the apostles and leaders of the emerging church in the New Testament didn’t stand back and call people to conform to their pattern but instead engaged with their world in the market-place, the temple, the debating areas we need to look at new ways to engage with people where they are. Taking church outside the building; taking church outside the familiar times and formats maybe the most potent way to answer such threats.

On the question of peer pressure the challenge is to nurture confidence in church members not only about what they believe but who they are now in Christ. Addressing peer pressure, whatever age you are, is not easy. Teaching and training together with prayer and supportive friendships will be vital to dealing with this threat.

Political correctness describes the antagonism towards the Christian church and its message by key commentators and outspoken critics in our society. With the fear of being labelled a ‘fundamentalist’ or a ‘fanatic’ and with the desire not to be lumped together with those who aggressively and insensitively presentation the gospel and so repel rather than attract people, this threat can often render us at best reluctant and at worst ashamed to admit to being followers of Jesus.

Once again the response to this threat is to embrace the challenge to find fresh and attractive ways to share the accepting, forgiving and caring love to a needy and broken world.

It is interesting to note that the list of opportunities provides the starter ideas that could very well address some of the threats outlined above. Two of the suggestions involve connecting with the community in the community through friendship and through involvement with local school.

Creating eye catching visual statements about faith for the local community to notice thus making use of the space around the building is a positive way to make the community stop and think. Events on the church grounds that are social nature and create soft entry points for the local community like picnics etc are excellent ways to generate connections that can do much to helping people discover that there is more to the church community than they first imagined.

Assessment 4: First Priority

Each group was asked to return to the 'dream sheet' and select the one dream they would make their top priority. Here is the list:

- *More community involvement & open air meetings / *More outreach**
- *ALPHA course/ *People sharing their faith with others without embarrassment**
- *More people – all seats filled every week by e.g. Open days & welcome packs, missions at home**
- *Fellowship group for young families / *More involved in Community/outlook**
- *More family services – children more involved in the service, because they are the future of our church**
- The appointment of personnel (paid appointments) to supervise the work of:**
 - **Caring for older members**
 - **Caring for the youth of the church**

There are three key areas highlighted here.

[1] Sharing faith – using a tool such as Alpha and setting the course up not in the church building but in the community would be achievable sooner rather than later. This coupled with training for members to help lead discussion groups could have the twin effect of building the confidence of members in sharing faith as well as creating opportunity to connect with the community.

[2] Strengthening family – Providing practical support for young families through a Parenting Course alongside a fellowship opportunity for young families to meet, share, pray and support one another would not only meet a need but help to confirm the strong sense of family that characterises Garnerville. This could also be reflected in Sunday services will regular family focussed inputs addressing issues faced by parents, teenagers and children.

[3] Supporting the ministry of the church – It is widely recognised that in order to release more members into active church service additional staff is vital. The suggestion to look for specific paid support staff for both senior and junior members of the congregation recognises that such support is time intensive and also requires careful planning and adequate resourcing. An initial approach might be to engage volunteers or interns through PCI or Belfast Bible College to kick start this initiative while generating the vision and the giving to make a permanent post or posts achievable.

Learning from the youngest members

While the number of children was small (5 in all) their comments about their experience of church is worth considering.

- ❖ For those under 10 church is about meeting friends and those activities that allow for that score highly. Presently they view their experience of church as just ok!
- ❖ For those over ten it is about learning about God and they view their current experience as really good
- ❖ Singing in Sunday school is not rated highly by either age range but it is interesting to note than the over 10's want to come to church where the under 10's see church attendance as something they have to do.
- ❖ In terms of improving their experience the creative use of outside space was highlighted (a rollercoaster was suggested by 40% of the participants!!!)

- ❖ Creating more time to spend with friends and exciting stories in a brighter more attractive environment would be a big plus.
- ❖ Trips including family trips was also suggested.

Summary

At the outset we stated that the exercise was aiming to answer three questions:

- 1) Where are we as a church fellowship?
- 2) Where would we like to be in 5 years?
- 3) What will be our priorities for the next year to eighteen months?

What are the answers?

- 1) It would be fair to say that Garnerville at present is best summarised as a welcoming and caring fellowship where members feel valued and where worship is engaging and encouraging. It must also be acknowledged that it is not as connected to the local community as it would wish to be and communication both internally and externally needs to be seriously addressed.
- 2) In 5 years time the dream is to have a 'full church' with a better balance of ages as well as male/female. The vision for the future is of a confident church able to express what it believes in ways that connect with the community and communicate God love in positive, attractive and engaging terms.
- 3) In the short term – to run an Alpha course or similar in a community setting.

In the short/medium – to provide support for young families in terms of resources and fellowship groups

In the medium term – to engage volunteer or intern staff to develop ministries to seniors as well as to youth

In the long term – to employ additional staff to develop new ministries and in order to release more members to serve Christ in the community as well as in the church family.

Conclusion

There are many positives to take from this process and much that needs to be thought about and prayed over.

Alongside the three priorities identified by the groups it would also be helpful if a clear statement of the church's purpose and vision was created. This would assist not only in terms of taking this process forward but also in terms of enabling every group/ministry in the church to engage in the process of self assessment and 'mid course correction'. It is inevitable that groups fall into 'ruts' or 'comfortable forms' and so lose something of the initial spark and focus.

A vision statement would help everyone know the direction and the shared values. This would help to motivate and maintain a sense of mission and purpose for those already onboard and for those checking out what church is all about.

The most crucial element of all is listening to and for God. With God all things are possible but without him we can do nothing (see John 15:5)

May God bless and guide you as you look for Him, listen to Him and follow after Him.

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