



## **Developing a Strategy for Your Congregation by Bishop Jonathan Gledhill**

During our various building projects, it was noticeable how people pulled together. They took pride in achieving things. They put themselves out for the common good. When we were not building, it was more difficult. The problem with much church life is we are dealing with the invisible and the ineffable. You cannot quantify growth in holiness at the annual general meeting. That is, of course, as it should be. To reduce a church to a local business with a business plan would be to empty it of its purpose.

Nevertheless, a church is not only part of God's eternal mission; it is also a corporate body with the usual characteristics and needs of an organization. Clear, intermediate, and achievable goals can be owned by members and can provide the context for particular ministries. I cannot ask someone to take over the chair of the mission action group, for instance, without providing a brief that starts with the church policy on mission.

Where does a church strategy come from? It is a complex and exciting process. In the Old Testament, God's will is revealed to the prophets. After receiving God's Word, the prophets confront God's people with its demands. The prophetic preaching of God's word is still the start of church strategy. In the historical books, we see God leading God's people, stretching their faith as they are toughened by the experiences of bondage, exile, and deliverance. Today, too, strategy emerges as various faith exercises stretch a congregation -- through the sickness and death of key members, through miracles and answers to prayer.

In the New Testament, Jesus battles with Satan in the wilderness over the difference between a superficial strategy of signs and wonders and a tougher one that follows the way of the cross. We see him spend nights in prayer over significant choices such as the calling of the twelve. Still today, a church will be faced with competing visions, some of them seductive. Without awareness of the battle in the heavens, Christian goal-setting is cutting corners. Is it coincidental that the churches that seem to take big risks and achieve great things are the churches that organize nights of prayer and days of fasting?

In the New Testament, we can see both Jesus and Paul laying down plans for mission, for covering the ground, for training and sending out disciples, for following-up and reflecting on mission work. It is an interesting exercise to study the interruptions that met Jesus on the way to Jerusalem and how he dealt with them; patiently allowing people's pain and suffering to delay him, and yet not permitting other people's agendas to deflect him from God's call. Both flexibility and ruthlessness are in the Lord's strategy.



Lewis Center  
for Church Leadership

# Leading Ideas

October 12, 2005

In the Acts and Epistles there is a constant tension between human planning, the cussedness of people and events, and the intervention of the Spirit in prophecy, dreams, and healings. Acts 16 is a fascinating cameo of how at the prompting of the Spirit carefully thought-out strategies are cast aside and a far greater enterprise undertaken, the first step in the evangelization of Europe. In Acts 13 the congregational leaders fast and wait upon God to fit people and tasks together. Still today, a strategy without the right people in the right posts is useless, but strategies pour out once the right people are in place.

In our parish, we have a church vision document which came out of much prayer and discussion with church leaders and the church council. It is printed on the inside cover of the church telephone book so everyone has a copy for reference. It is given to all taking on a new ministry. Then we have various applications of the vision for particular areas of work: for the youth work, for example, or the choir and band. Neither the church vision nor the various policy documents are permanent; rather they are snapshots of a church that is moving on. Every couple of years or so we discover that some part is out of date and needs to be modified.

It is against the background of a church struggling to grow and change in obedience to the Spirit that other more concrete goals are determined and decisions made; all the fascinating details of church life from installing new gas heaters in the church hall to holding a holiday club for children. Having an inspiring and demanding vision and strategy in place has the great advantage of putting other decisions into perspective. The whole decision-making process can be cooler and calmer. We have all experienced tiny decisions assuming huge importance in church councils and committees. When a church is excited about moving forward, even quite major decisions can safely be put into the hands of officers and working parties, and church councils can debate and pray about matters of principle and longer-term policy rather than spending interminable meetings on whether or not to move the bookstall.

Bishop Jonathan Gledhill ([bishop.lichfield@lichfield.anglican.org](mailto:bishop.lichfield@lichfield.anglican.org)) is Bishop of Lichfield in the Church of England and author of *Leading a Local Church in the Age of the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 2003) from which this material is used by permission.