

# The Areopagus:

## Conversations on the Mission Frontier

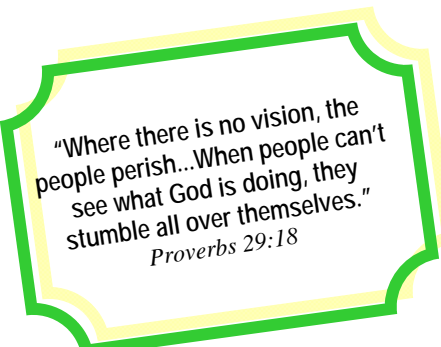
I had been a pastor less than a month. My wife & I had moved into our newly rented flat. I had organized my office at the church. I had worshipped, led worship, & preached at Emanuel's Lutheran Church, in Seguin, Texas...my first call. I had met all the members of the ministry team: Stan, the Senior Pastor; Tom, the Music Director; Cathy & Virginia, our administrative staff; Pat, our Day School Director (pre-school through K); Helen & Porfirio, our Janitorial & maintenance staff. I was yet to be formally ordained & installed, but I was "in."

Stan & I had a Zone Pastors' meeting in a nearby city that day. We were on the road for about 40 minutes each way. As we drove toward San Antonio, Stan told me everything I didn't already know about the church we would serve together... everything that hadn't been discussed in the interview & call process... everything that some would want to hide.

Stan described the congregation's history of conflict...an ugly church

split 25 years previous that still coloured the thinking of Lutherans & others in town. He described the indecision & bad decisions of previous church leaders (lay & pastors alike). He told me about debt, disrepair, & decay. After about 15 minutes I was beginning to doubt whether saying "yes" to this call was a good idea.

But then the conversation shifted. Stan began to talk not about the congregation's history, but about our destiny. He described in glowing terms what "could be & should be" in the mission & ministry of Emanuel's Lutheran Church. Stan was "old school" & would never have called what he described a



"Where there is no vision, the people perish...When people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves."  
*Proverbs 29:18*

“vision,” (and neither would I at the time) but that’s what it was...a vision, a preferred future toward which God would take us, a distant horizon toward which we would travel, a description of the kind of church Emanuel’s could & should become if we were faithful to what God was calling us to be.

Over & over again, Stan used the words, “renew, revitalize, & reorganize.” He described how everything from the toilets to the sanctuary, from the school to the Sunday School, from the youth to the Office Staff, from church council to the buildings themselves needed to be “renewed, revitalized, & reorganized.”

We never put it in these words, but what Stan articulated that day was how Emanuel’s would become a church of renewal by the power of God’s love. That was the vision he had as Senior Pastor & which I would help pursue as Assistant Pastor. And who would have wanted anything else? As surely as the skyline of San Antonio rose up before us on Interstate Highway 10, I could literally see what God had placed on Stan’s heart; his vision, for Emanuel’s.

But this picture of Emanuel’s destiny wasn’t just for the pastors to discuss in the privacy of our own conversations. Stan laid out this

vision in every sermon, every Bible study, every staff meeting, every home visit, every casual conversation, every newsletter...Stan & I made the most of every opportunity we had to cast that vision for the congregation & community. The words, “renew, revitalize, & reorganize” were heard again & again.

Is this sort of vision really necessary to lead Christ’s church? Do I have to cast a picture of God’s desired destiny for the congregation? And do I have to do it repeatedly?

George Barna writes, “Ministry without vision is like...a cow loose in the pasture: just grazing...a snake: ill-focused, spineless, & attracted to whatever’s hot...a woman proposing to Boy George: it won’t change a thing...a preacher who has not prepared the sermon: the intersection of arrogance & ignorance...”<sup>1</sup> It bears repeating the familiar saying, “Everyone ends up somewhere. A few people will get there on purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

When I think about 20 years of ministry as a pastor...the greatest moves forward were in pursuit of a God-given vision. The greatest times of struggle were when we were simply doing things...even good things, but going nowhere. Catching, casting, & keeping a vision weren’t part of my seminary curriculum. I

learned at the side of a skilled pastor who taught me by example. I've since read books, gone to conferences, listened to other visionary pastors... but the story remains the same, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." "When people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves." (Proverbs 29:18 KJV & The Message)

It seems that the greatest threat churches face is not theological, moral or cultural. We are seeing the results of generations of decline & decay in our churches in many respects because we are in the main not seeking, not seeing, & not pursuing a God-given vision for the congregations we serve. We are doing many things for many people but in many cases actually leading no one anywhere. We're just grazing, attracted to what's hot, not changing anything...at the intersection of arrogance & ignorance...Ouch!

This little newsletter is designed to encourage & equip pastors & lay people to assess & address their mission frontier. I hope that it is a conversation: a collection of stories that all point to what God is seeking to do through our congregations. I hope it does not become a dog's breakfast of "tips, tricks, & timesavers." You will have opportunity to ask questions, to make observations, & tell your mission stories.

Paul, under the power of the Holy Spirit turns the Areopagus of Acts 17 into just such a place...a place of observation...a place of conversation & then a place of mission.

In this Areopagus, there will be suggested resources that you might find helpful. Here there will be questions posed that you might find worthy challenges for your congregation. In this Areopagus you will find companions to walk your mission journey alongside you the way Stan walked with me into mission nearly 20 years ago. Nothing here is guaranteed to "work" except the prayers that accompany each issue, & the gospel we each seek to proclaim & live. Those carry the promise of God who hears & answers prayer & who in Jesus has given us a share in the gospel's promise of eternity in His presence. That same God, in Jesus, shares with us his redeeming work, to "preach the good news to everyone" and "make disciples of all nations." If we can do that together, authentically & effectively in our mission frontiers... then we'll have done precisely what I believe God has called us to do.

## Some Resources:

1. Turning Vision into Action by George Barna
2. Visioneering by Andy Stanley

I ordered both through Amazon.com out of the US. Total cost was about \$50 USD. Delivery time was less than 6 weeks. The Barna book is out of print but is available through Amazon's used book division.

### Also:

UnStoppable Force by Erwin McManus  
Direct Hit by Paul Borden

### Questions for congregations:

1. Stop someone at worship this week & ask them, "In 1 sentence, what is our church's vision?" What answers do you think you'd receive? What answer would you give?
2. If you could "dream" of a church that genuinely & effectively touched lives in your community in the name of Jesus & for the sake of his mission, what sort of church would it be? Can you describe not its programs, but its character? Can you tell me how it would look & feel to a visitor? Can you express what sort of "spirit" one coming for the first time would experience?
3. What sort of leadership would that church require? What would have to change where you currently worship or serve for it to become that church?
4. What would have to change in you for that "dream" church to come into being?
5. In Acts 17:15-34, what are some ways Paul engages the Athenian culture as a vehicle for sharing the Gospel? How could your church engage your local culture & in doing so, proclaim Jesus' saving love?

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