

Diagnose Your Church's Health
Does the Church Have a Strategic Plan for Future Growth?
 By Chuck Lawless

This article is the seventh in a series dealing with questions to ask when consulting with a church. Previous questions were:

- “Is the church’s teaching based on the Bible?”
- “Is the church a praying church?”
- “Is the church driven by a Great Commission focus?”
- “Is the church reaching non-believers?”
- “Is the church keeping new believers who join?”
- “Is the church both locally and globally minded?”

The question for this month reflects the reality that we are in a real spiritual battle as we seek to lead growing, healthy churches. One reason the Enemy so readily succeeds in attacking churches is because he is often a better planner—that, is a strategist (Eph. 6:11)—than most church leaders are. He methodically and strategically attacks the church while most churches operate from week to week. We are not prepared for his attacks.

In the same way, most churches would not be prepared for significant growth if God were to grant it. What would the church do if God sent a genuine awakening? Does the church have a vision around which their plans—including facility, staffing, and programming—are developed?

Most churches do not have such a plan, and the reasons for their failure to plan are numerous. Perhaps their leaders have not been trained *how* to plan. Others fear the risk inherent in planning; if we plan and fail, the failure is on our shoulders. Still others think that planning reflects a failure to trust God for the future. Claiming to be “trusting God,” they often live in firefighting mode—continually putting out fires today rather than preparing for tomorrow. Whatever the reason, a failure to plan is, in fact, an invitation to fail.

Here are several ways for the consultant to determine whether the church has a strategic plan for future growth:

1. *Up front, ask the church what they expect to get from your consultation.* Do they simply want a diagnosis of their issues, or do they want a full prescription for their problems as well? Some churches do think strategically, and they seek a consultation simply to get a second opinion. More often, though, the church wants both diagnosis and prescription. They want help with strategic planning, often because they have not done so successfully in the past.
2. *Ask the pastor to tell you his vision for the church for the next five years.* I have asked this question often, and I am amazed by the number of pastors who have no long-term vision for their church. Sometimes the pastor has little intention of remaining at the church that long . . . and thus, no long-term strategic planning. An

- uncommitted leader results in an unfocused church. For that reason, I always ask the pastor how long he plans to stay at the church.
3. *In the interview process, ask each staff member or lay leader to give you his/her understanding of the church's short and long-term vision.* Where there is no general understanding of the church's vision, there is likely no strategic planning taking place. Likewise, generic responses (e.g., "Our vision is to do the Great Commission," or "Our vision is to love everyone as Jesus did") probably indicate that the church has not spoken much about a specific vision that demands proper strategic planning.
 4. *Interview church members about the church's plan to reach their community.* In the course of typical interviews for a consultation, ask church members about the church's outreach plan. If the church has a plan about which the members are unaware, a communication problem exists. More likely, you will learn that the church has no known plan for reaching their community—and likewise little strategic planning overall.
 5. *Request a copy of the last long-range planning report for the church.* If the church indeed has one, determine whether the church implemented any of the report's recommendations. Too often a church will do some planning, but then carry out none of the recommendations. That church is unlikely to be consistently doing strategic planning.
 6. *Ask about the church's master site plan.* Strategic planning is most critical when planning facility resources. All of us have seen the church whose facilities reflected no planning—disconnected buildings with different color brick, parking lots later covered with buildings, etc. If a church has no master site plan, they have not done enough strategic planning.
 7. *Review the church's budgeting process, particularly focusing on plans to prepare for future ministries, staffing, and facilities.* Are funds set aside this year to hire the new minister proposed previously by the leadership team? Is the church saving toward the next phase of the building process? Or, does the church budget focus on only this current year?

Strategic planning is a difficult and time-consuming process. In fact, few short-term consultations provide enough time (and income) for the consultant to produce a full plan for the church. Rather, the consultant should be prepared to help the church think about the importance of planning, give general training, direct them to resources, and perhaps be available for follow-up to hold the church accountable to its own planning. Keep this truth in mind during the process: good strategic thinking is one means to counter the devil's scheming against God's church.