

4 Keys to Listening and Leading with Vision

How does a church discern its call to ministry—creating ministry space that lines up with its mission and vision?

Often believers and churches seem to be waiting for God to strike them with a lightning bolt, to reveal what he wants them to do through some spectacular event. But God isn't a genie who pops out of a bottle. A church that waits passively finds itself beset with ministry paralysis.

Then there are the churches that show a degree of life and energy and have significant percentages of the local body engaged in ministry, yet what they do is routine and ineffective. Call it "ministry calcification." Maybe what they are doing was effective five years ago or even last year, but communities can change rapidly. Many churches are ministering to people who have long ago left the community. The missional church constantly assesses what God is doing in a community and what needs are emerging—and adjusts its ministries accordingly.

Do I believe God reveals himself and gives us direction in life? Yes, absolutely. But I also believe he reveals himself more specifically as we obey the commands he has already given us. In other words, God will show us how he wants our church to minister to the community when we act on the directives he has already given us.

Four of the last things Jesus said to his disciples in his final days on earth are a good place for his followers and his churches to seek direction:

1. **Jesus reminded his followers they have been sent just like he was:** "As the Father sent me, I also send you" (John 20:21). Now, if he stopped there, it could still be pretty confusing. He didn't specifically tell them where to go, what to do, what to say, or what to accomplish. He just told them they were being shipped out to serve in his spiritual army.
2. **Jesus continues to clarify the vision and mission he has for his followers and churches:** "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). Going out to all the world and proclaiming the Good News was to result in new disciples among all people groups. After that, Christ's followers are supposed to baptize new disciples and teach them to follow everything he commanded.
3. **Jesus isn't finished yet.** Before he ascends, he tells them: "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead the third day, and repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And look, I am sending you what my father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high" (Luke 24:46-49). This clarifies the Good News they are to announce: Jesus died in our place so we could repent and be forgiven of our sins, and he rose from the dead so we could live a victorious life. In order to be witnesses about these things, however, they needed one more thing: the power from on high promised by the Father.

4. The last thing Jesus communicated to his disciples picked up where his previous instructions ended. **He laid out a strategy for things to move forward:** “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). A good place for his followers and churches to start is to be witnesses in their own communities and then move out from there, as he leads and opens doors for ministry.

As you begin to engage practically in fulfilling the mission and vision that God has already given us, he will begin to reveal where your church fits best in serving and witnessing to your community. Instead of sitting around, waiting to be hit by lightning, here are some practical ways you and your church can begin to discern your ministry call.

Pray together for great boldness. The early believers followed Jesus’ instructions and actively waited and prayed for what the Father promised. Assemble a group of people regularly and pray for your church to be filled and anointed with the Spirit. The believers joining constantly in prayer led to the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost.

Most people remember that prayer preceded Pentecost, but they may not remember that Jesus’ followers kept praying after Pentecost. Acts 4:23-31 records believers gathering and raising their voices in prayer. They stood in prayer against the people who were persecuting them and the forces of evil, right? Wrong! They asked the Lord to enable them to speak his word with great boldness and prayed he would do wonderful things through the name of his holy servant, Jesus.

What does the current prayer environment of our church look like? Are we praying those kinds of prayers? What steps will we take to change the environment?

Explore multiple ministry options in your community. As you pray, take action by serving your community and finding ways to be his witnesses. God will give your people new passion and direction for ministry as they engage their community. Jesus himself “saw the crowds” and “felt compassion for them” (Matt. 9:36). Try some or all of these practical ideas:

- Set up a time each month to conduct servant evangelism projects like giving away free drinks (water, hot chocolate, coffee, pop, etc.) at a traffic intersection, cleaning local parks, raking leaves or mowing grass for elderly folks, giving away coupons for free stuff, etc.
- Involve your small groups or Sunday school classes in community service projects at least once a quarter so they aren’t just fellowshiping and learning stuff.
- Start ongoing ministries by getting some of your members involved in things like Release Time (for public school kids), Hospice, Big Brother Big Sister, and City Mission. Intentionally train people to be better witnesses with evangelism training like Two Ways to Live, I Am Second, and others. [I discuss tools more here](#), but I’d also love to hear what you are using in the comments. So much good stuff out there.
- Ask three people in your congregation to set up interviews with leaders of local service agencies to discover unmet needs your church family might be able to address.

Trust God to open specific doors of ministry. As you begin to engage practically in fulfilling the mission and vision God has given you, he will begin to reveal where your church fits best in serving your community. God will show you “persons of peace” who will unlock doors of opportunity you didn’t even know existed. As we act in faith, God will provide unique opportunities to serve and witness—and people will get excited about joining God in what he is opening before them.

I believe that Jesus opens doors of ministry for us to walk through as we pray and engage the needs in our communities. He also shuts other doors. See Revelation 3:7. We really don’t know which doors are open and which ones are shut until we start trying doorknobs. As we seek the Lord with all our hearts—and act in faith—he directs our steps.

So, what is it going to take for your church to discern its ministry call? Pray fervently together for the Spirit’s filling. Engage the people and needs in your community. And trust that God will open ministry doors for your church.

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