Once your church understands what God is calling it to do, identifies its ministry strengths, and shares a hopeful vision for the future, it is time to translate discernment into action. In the past, vestries often began a lengthy strategic planning effort that would produce a long list of goals, neatly slotted into a timeline covering the next three, five, or even ten years. At ECF, we see that many strategic plans generate too many goals leaving little room to adapt to unpredictable and changing circumstances. Congregations may find these three-to-five year plans are soon outdated and shelved.

A more nimble model is needed to address the challenges of today’s fast-paced world. Churches and other organizations are turning to strategic thinking—an ongoing, dynamic process that understands the need to embrace change in order to move forward. Strategic thinking focuses on developing effective strategies for a few goals rather than for many. It recognizes that there are challenges and opportunities that cannot be fully anticipated at the present time.

Strategic thinking is not about bringing a project or plan to successful completion. It’s much more like being responsive to the Spirit’s leading—letting your vision guide you toward seeing possibilities, trying things, keeping what works, and letting go of the rest.

**How Strategic Thinking Works**

Strategic thinking is a way to address the big-picture challenges progressively. The process begins with three steps:

- Identifying a few goals that are aligned with the congregation’s long-term vision
- Identifying potential strategies for reaching those goals
- Evaluating your potential long- and short-term strategies in light of mission, financial capacity, strengths, and other criteria

A wide net is cast to collect as many strategies as possible. Asking questions—including identifying the things you value most as a congregation—might help you select the best ideas for achieving your goals. As a strategy is implemented, it is evaluated. If it’s not working, it is dropped. For example, to live into its vision, Christ Church, Pensacola, Florida, identified some priorities for strategic action. These goals included developing more robust marketing, determining the best use of some recent property acquisitions, and providing vital programs to reach youth and families.

With the economy still reeling from the 2008 downturn, Christ Church did not immediately jump into new expenditures to achieve their goals. Instead, the goals became a guiding force for the vestry, which reviewed them annually and worked to strengthen Christ Church’s ability to achieve them.
The process of identifying goals, developing, testing, and evaluating strategies is continuous—enabling organizations to tackle complex challenges and move forward, one step at a time.

**Strategic Thinking Begins with the Vestry**

Strategic thinking is an effective model for confronting the tough choices our churches face today; it works for faith communities of all sizes. You have identified ministry strengths and discerned a hopeful vision of your church’s impact on the future. Your congregation has participated in the discernment process and has a shared understanding of your church’s mission, strengths, and vision. Your communications—from the pulpit to Facebook—reinforce that shared purpose.

Now you are ready to use the big-picture time in your vestry meetings to apply strategic thinking to an issue that goes beyond the day-to-day business of your faith community. Select a challenge facing your church, and consider it in the context of your vision for the future. Identify a few major goals for the next twelve to eighteen months that will begin to address the challenge.

Let’s say the urban neighborhood around your congregation is changing. The demographics are shifting with younger adults moving into the area and aging empty nesters moving away. Your church is becoming increasingly marginalized, almost invisible. Let’s also imagine that an aspect of your church’s hopeful vision is that it will become a congregation that reflects the diversity of the neighborhood. With that scenario, over the next twelve to eighteen months, your goals might be:

- To participate in the community as a congregation
- To make your worship and life more welcoming and accessible to younger adults

**The Congregation’s Role**

In a strategic thinking model, the leadership doesn't have to generate all the ideas. So the next step is to frame your goals as questions and take them to the congregation: How can we participate as a congregation in the wider community and become more visible? What can we do to help our new neighbors feel welcome in our life and worship?

Invite everyone—core leaders, newcomers, youth, active and inactive members—to participate in brainstorming strategies on these two questions. Part of this brainstorming should include time in the wider community talking with people who are unfamiliar with the congregation and asking questions about their needs and desires for a community of faith. In that great harvest of ideas you'll find creative and innovative possibilities. You'll also gain the interest and support of the congregation—a vital element in moving toward the goals you select.

**Developing a Strategic Filter**

Brainstorming produces a lot of potential strategies. The question becomes, “How does the vestry evaluate the ideas collected during brainstorming?” To do that, you need a set of values—strategic criteria—to bring best ideas to the surface. Some suggested strategic criteria are mission and vision, uniqueness, financial sustainability, identity, and internal capacity. To apply them, look at each idea and ask:

- Does this support our mission and vision?
- Is it unique or does it duplicate others’ work?
- Is it financially sustainable through potential gifts or fees?
• Is it consistent with our identity?

• Do we have the internal capacity to begin and sustain this initiative?

In discussing the potential strategies together, your vestry will find that some ideas meet all criteria and others fall short in one or two key areas. With this analysis in hand, the vestry will decide on one or two ideas to implement. Regular evaluation is critical. If a strategy is not working, learn from the experience and try something else.

Maybe your congregation is not ready for a coffee shop ministry. Try a different way to show that you welcome and care about the new community. Offer a worship service on a Sunday evening or begin a Bible study geared to younger adults. Host some service projects and invite neighbors to participate. Establish a community garden that can meet the needs of an urban setting and provide an example of environmental stewardship.

Go where your vision and the energy of your people take you. The point is to keep working toward that hopeful future, one strategic step at a time.

Try This
In part one of this article, vestry members were invited to consider their ministry strengths. As you move from vision to strategic thinking, you'll likely generate a number of ideas of how to translate your vision into action. A strategic filter is a helpful tool for evaluating each idea and allowing the best to surface. For each idea raised, consider evaluating it using these five questions:

• Does this support our mission and vision?

• Is it unique or does it duplicate others' work?

• Is it financially sustainable through potential gifts or fees?

• Is it consistent with our identity?

• Do we have the internal capacity to begin and sustain this initiative?

This article is an excerpt from the 2015 edition of the Vestry Resource Guide, an ECF publication by Nancy Davidge, ECF associate program director and editor, ECF Vital Practices and church communications writer and consultant Susan Elliott. The Vestry Resource Guide helps vestry members and clergy work together to become an effective, even transformational leadership team. With information and recommendations for congregations of all shapes and sizes, this is an essential tool to help vestries focus on what God is calling them to do in the world. Available in English or Spanish, and in both print and eBook formats.

Resources

• “A Snapshot of Our Urban Neighborhood” by Anna Olson, ECF Vital Practices Vestry Papers, January 2012

• “Strategic Thinking for Congregations” an ECF webinar


• “The Power of a Shared Nightmare” by Miguel Escobar, ECF Vital Practices Vital Post, January 29,
2013

- "How to Just Try a Few Things: Lean Experimentation" by Sarai Rice, Congregational Consulting Group

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