

Churches with a Vision for the Future: A profile of the Baptist Union of Victoria¹

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Abstract: *Having a vision for the future is an important barometer of church health and vitality. Drawing from analysis of the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) 2011 data of Victorian Baptists (8330 adult attenders across 79 churches) and a small set of follow-up interviews it is clear that while there are high levels of commitment to the idea of vision, at both a leadership and membership level, it can be hard to help attenders capture and own a vision. The data has demonstrated a strong association between churches with a clear vision for the future and numerical growth, a strong sense of belonging and innovation. Church leaders reinforce this, stating that a well-defined vision gives a clear sense of direction and facilitates decision-making and resource allocation. To be most effective a church's vision should be mission focused, engage the skills and gifts of the membership and be accessible to the whole group. A vision should be discerned in a context of trust, acceptance, humility and patience. The ongoing examination and evaluation of the outworkings of a church's vision enables churches to move forward with confidence and purpose. Finding the balance between innovation and realism, planning and action can be challenging but ultimately very powerful.*

Key Words: Baptist church, vision, church growth, practical theology, NCLS

Ministry in the Western world calls for leadership that can help churches embrace the changes necessary to move forward into a new era. When it comes to church vitality, research on thousands of Australian churches has found that one of the most important areas is the ability of churches to develop a clear vision or direction that attenders are strongly committed to.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A VISION

The 2011 National Church Life Survey (2011 NCLS) is a survey of Australian church attenders conducted across more than 3100 local churches in 23 Christian denominations. Around 260000 church attenders were asked whether they were both aware and committed to the vision, goals or directions of their local church for its ministry and

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mission. Those who took part in the 2011 NCLS included 79 Victorian Baptist churches and their 8330 adult attenders.²

There are very few churches where all attenders are strongly committed to the vision of their church. Indeed among Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) churches, around a third of attenders feel this way. This shows that most church leaders face the immense challenge of helping their attenders to develop a compelling vision, to be committed to that vision and to maintain that commitment through to its fulfilment.

Vision is linked to numerical growth and newcomers

NCLS researchers have found that a strong commitment to the vision, goals or directions of the church is associated with growth in attendance. In fact, it is more strongly related to growth than most other factors that have been tested. Content of a vision is important. It is not sufficient for a church to adopt just any vision. A vision for mission and for congregational and neighbourhood transformation is what is critical. Moreover, the process of inviting a congregation to shape a vision is, in itself, advantageous for church belonging and ownership. While there is no “magic bullet” when it comes to church growth, the research across different Christian faith traditions indicates this to be one of the most important areas for church leaders to consider.

That this has emerged from survey data reveals an important fact: the churches that grew were not those where the leadership simply produced a vision, but where attenders responded well to the vision and adopted it as their own. The vision has been communicated clearly and has been formed in a way that has led to ownership by the church attenders.

Based on studies of churches across five-year periods, knowing the levels of commitment to vision in a church is also one of the best clues for whether they will attract newcomers. Churches with high levels of attenders strongly committed to the vision of their church also tend to be churches with high levels of newcomers. In addition, they are churches where high levels of young adults remain in church life. Without a compelling vision that people are committed to, growth is in jeopardy.

Vision is associated with other Core Qualities

NCLS Research has identified nine Core Qualities to measure a church’s vitality. The work emphasises that:

- Each Core Quality is valuable in its own right;
- These Core Qualities are related to numerical outcomes, such as church growth, newcomers, and retaining young adults;
- Changes in one Core Quality impact other Core Qualities.

The four Core Qualities that have the strongest associations with other qualities are:

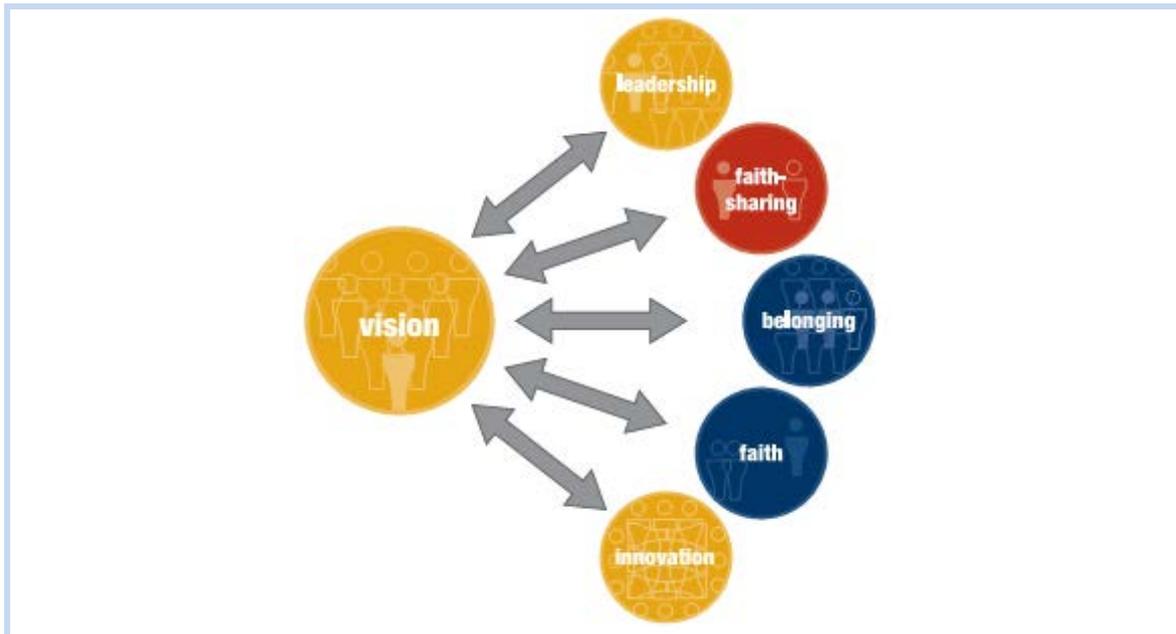
(1) Faith-sharing;

² In this paper, tests of statistical significance were carried out using the Mann-Whitney U test.

- (2) Empowering leadership;
- (3) Clear and owned vision;
- (4) Growth in faith.³

The importance of churches having a clear and owned vision is highlighted by the fact that it is one of those qualities with the highest number of strong relationships with other Qualities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Vision and strongest associations with other Core Qualities⁴



Having a clear and owned vision occurs more often in a church that offers inspiring and empowering leadership. It occurs more in churches where attenders act by inviting others and sharing faith. This potentially is because it builds confidence in the church as a purposeful body with a mission to fulfil.

Such churches also typically have higher levels of belonging, perhaps because vision-building encourages a unifying process, or perhaps vision and belonging reinforce each other. Higher commitment to vision is also associated with a higher perception that the church is innovative, suggesting that the willingness to be flexible, or even take a risk, goes together with this Core Quality.

To further develop our understanding of churches with a vision for the future we identified twelve churches which the NCLS data identified as strong in the quality of “Clear and Owned Vision”, and approached the church for a phone interview with one of their leaders. Two church leaders declined and two were unavailable within the allocated time

³ Ruth Powell, et al., *Enriching Church Life: A Guide to Results from National Church Life Surveys for Local Churches* (2nd edition) (Sydney: Mirrabooka Press and NCLS Research, 2012) 99.

⁴ Ibid. 99.

frame, but Stacey Wilson conducted phone interviews with leaders from the remaining eight churches:

- (1) Mark Brett, Deacon, and Tri Nguyen, Pastor, Brunswick Baptist Church (3 September 2013);
- (2) Chris Rowney, Pastor, Torquay Christian Fellowship (4 September 2013);
- (3) Alan Williams, deacon, Grovedale Baptist Church (5 September 2013);
- (4) Jude Waldron, Pastor, Armadale Baptist Church (5 September 2013);
- (5) James Lewis, Pastor, Anglesea Baptist Church (5 September 2013);
- (6) Murray Campbell, Pastor, Mentone Baptist Church (12 September 2013);
- (7) Heath McSolvin, Church Secretary, AuburnLife (27 September 2013);
- (8) Jonathon Stark, Pastor, Wodonga Baptist Church (8 October 2013)

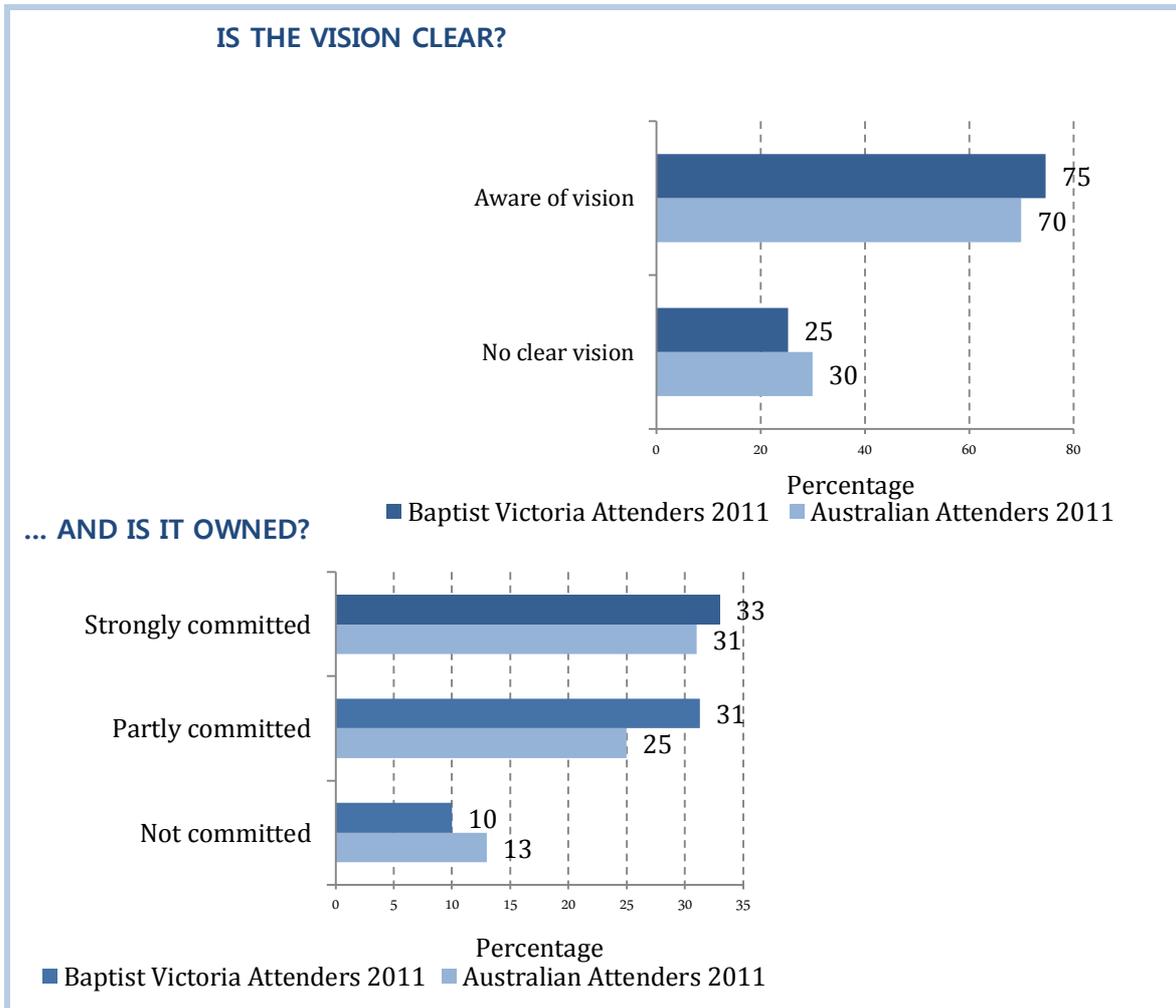
The eight churches included small inner-city/inner-suburban congregations in multicultural areas (Brunswick, and AuburnLife), older established suburbs (Armadale and Mentone), two in beachside towns on the coast (Anglesea and Torquay), one in the regional city of Geelong in an ageing community (Grovedale), and a larger regional country church in northern Victoria (Wodonga).

The interviews offered stories and principles of vision from local church leaders. This is a representative sample of churches from within the Baptist Union of Victoria. However, it should be noted, they were selected using a single indicator question which asked if attenders were aware and strongly committed to the vision, goals and directions of the church. A broader analysis of the NCLS data would have generated a different sample. This paper explores the issues of a future-oriented vision for all 79 churches who participated in the survey, triangulated with interviews with this selection of 8 church interviews.

THE IMPACT OF VISION ON MINISTRY

In the 2011 NCLS attenders were asked: "Does this congregation/parish have a clear vision, goals or direction for its ministry and mission?" Figure 2 shows that some 75% of Victorian Baptist attenders were aware of the vision that their local church has for the future. This compares favourably to 70% across all Australian churches. On the other hand, 25% are not aware of a clear vision. Of these, some 11% of attenders said that they were not aware of such a vision, goals or direction (compared to 17% overall). A further 15% claimed there were ideas, but no clear vision, goals or direction (compared to 13% overall). Statistical tests found that the Victorian Baptist distribution of results for this question was significantly different from that of all Australian attenders ($p < .001$).

Figure 2: Attenders’ awareness and commitment to the vision⁵



When interviewed, all the leaders expressed a strong commitment to the concept and practice of fostering a sense of vision with their church. They felt that having a vision gave the church a clear sense of direction, and helped with decision-making and allocation of resources. For example, Jude Waldron from Armadale shared:

Having a vision means we can evaluate what we are doing and ask, “Is that what we are called to do or are we just doing it because it sounds like a nice idea?” I believe that God equips people to do what he has called them to do, as opposed to doing whatever you feel like doing and then saying, “Oh no, we’ve got no resources”.

Waldron is confident that a vision inspired by God will be provided for with God’s provision.

The importance of using a vision process to guide decision-making was another theme that was raised consistently by participants. Many of the leaders stated that to be useful in this way it was important that the vision was both clear and practical. Broad or obscure visions were not found to be particularly valuable. Chris Rowney from Torquay

⁵ 2011 NCLS Attender Survey A.

states: “To have a vision that we are going to reach our town for Christ might sound good, but you can say that for twenty years and never take any steps that take you closer to doing that.” Some churches have found it useful to have a broad vision statement that they then flesh out with more specific goals. This enables them to have both consistency and flexibility. The general vision statement forms the basis for the situation specific goal setting. Churches need to develop and articulate a vision of where they want to go, but also need to develop strategy of how they are going to get there.

The visioning process was also found to have benefits in and of itself in fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. Tri Nguyen and Mark Brett describe how, instead of looking for vision primarily from the pastor, the vision has come very much from within the church. It was important for Brunswick to include the whole congregation in discerning their vision, as Nguyen comments: “When we value the participation of everybody, including the kids, then the vision affirms each and everybody’s part.” Nguyen, while expressing some reservations about formal defined vision statements, believes strongly in the benefits of creating the space for ongoing conversations about who we are and what we are called to do as believers: “So it’s not so much about where we are going, as this is who we are and what God is calling us to be”. He articulates a sense of wanting to discern what God is doing and to celebrate that: “We are going through a visioning process because we recognise God is doing something amazing here. We want to get a sense of what that is and we want to name it in order to give us clarity and it is important for everyone to participate in that naming.” This differs from most visioning processes in that Nguyen and the leadership team at Brunswick have taken a deliberate step back.

As a pastor I intentionally work at facilitating rather than participating in this process, I want to be a pastor that serves people’s vision, rather than doing something on my own ... If I’m involved, people think this is part of my vision and I am trying to bring them along. Instead I intentionally provide people with the space and the tools without so much being involved ... I come here as a servant and trust that it is the discernment of the people of God ... and God’s presence in the midst of that, rather than the discernment of the pastor or an individual. [I] feel safe to trust the community of people rather than trusting in my own.

Nguyen’s perspective is helpful to balance a perspective in modern visioning processes that stress the need for a leader to outline a preferred future direction, complete with strategic plan on how to manage and deliver the results. He is modelling a collaborative approach that affirms the potential of God’s people to discern where God is calling them.

Alan Roxburgh similarly counsels an approach to missional planning that draws out the congregation.⁶ He suggests that two mistakes churches make with strategic planning are to get preoccupied with numbers of people attending church (rather than disciples made and sent), and to expect we can make definite five year goals as if we know what the world will be like. The process is more like map-making, to plot a direction and course, and make adjustments en route. Roxburgh contends that vision and imagination for fresh direction is already present in any congregation; the best way to hear what the vision may be is through ‘listening conversations’ and dialogue: “The great reality of the church is that by the Spirit, God’s imagination for the future is already among God’s people, and so the

⁶ Alan Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2010) 179; reviewed by Darren Cronshaw in *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul-Care* 6:1 (2013) 135-137.

work of leadership is in the cultivation of the environment that will allow this imagination to gather energy".⁷ The leader's task is to facilitate rather than dictate that process, and as Roxburgh says not to pretend to know what the future will bring but to make maps for the church's future as it unfolds.

Different churches and leaders will have different approaches to discerning and communicating vision, and involve the people of the church to greater and lesser extents at different stages. There are multiple ways to form vision, the more traditional leadership led process or the church directed approach. However it is very clear that regardless of how it is done, it is very important that it is done. And wherever the vision is sourced, through a leader's or their team's imagination or from a broader representation of the church, it is key that the vision is communicated to the church.

ATTENDER'S COMMITMENT TO THE VISION

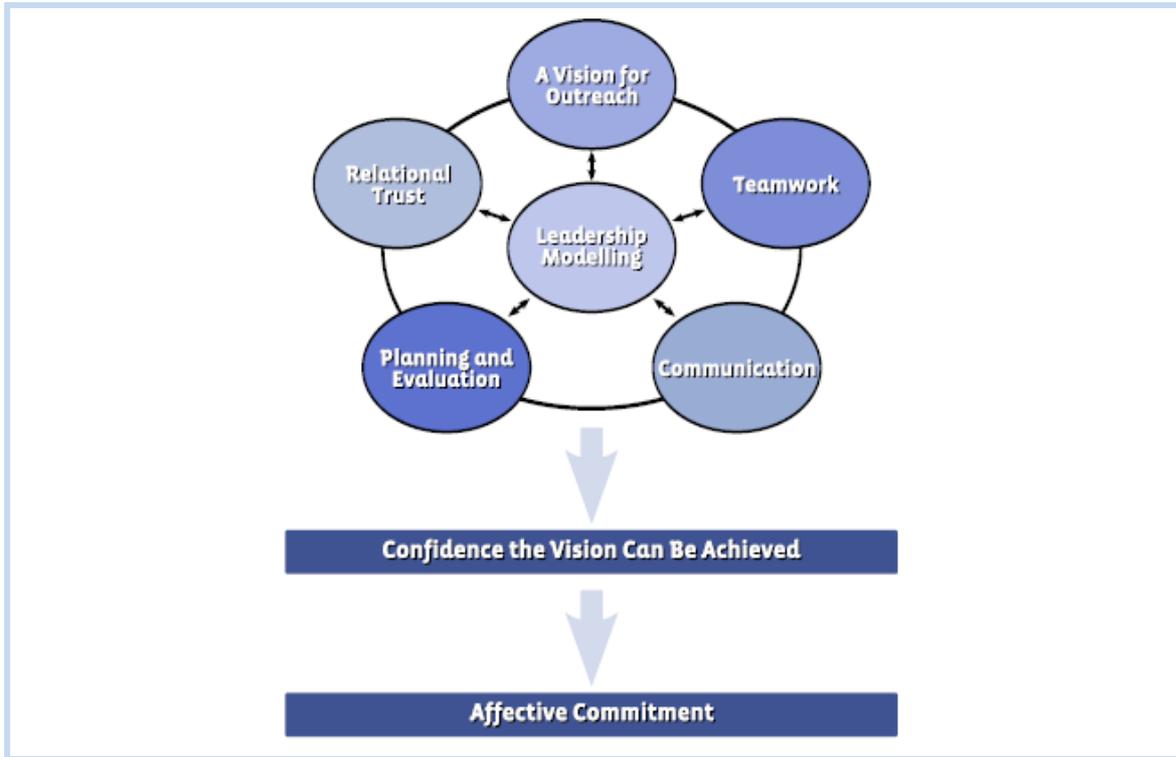
In vital churches, the vision must not only be communicated clearly, but it must also be owned by attenders. In Victorian Baptist churches, as measured by NCLS 2011, 33% of attenders are not only aware, but are strongly committed to the vision, goals or direction of their local church. (Among all churches, the level of strong commitment to the vision was 31%). Some 31% of Victorian Baptist attenders are only partly committed to the vision (compared to 25% overall). Finally, there are 10% of attenders who say they are aware of the vision, goals or direction, but they are not committed to them. (This compares favourably to 13% of all Australian churches.) Thus, on average, Victorian Baptists are a few percentage points higher than the national average. As already stated, the Victorian Baptist distribution of results for this question was statistically significantly different from that of all Australian attenders ($p < .001$).

Discerning a vision for mission and ministry and motivating local church attenders to commit to it can be hard work, yet the impact is far-reaching. What can be done to motivate commitment?

Figure 3 illustrates a process to motivate attenders to commit to a vision. There are important inter-related steps in the commitment process. These feed a sense of confidence, which translates to greater commitment to vision.

⁷ Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making* 179.

Figure 3: A Process to Motivate Attenders⁸



This framework pictured in Figure 3 was first presented in the book, *A Passion for Evangelism*.⁹ Theory and research using NCLS data and a Congregational Commitment Study (CCS), was linked with the practical experiences of Australian church leaders. These steps are presented here integrated with latest findings for Australian churches from the 2011 National Church Life Survey. The results presented and summarised in Table 1 which are discussed below the table provides measures for each of the components in Figure 3.

Table 1: Motivating Commitment to the Vision¹⁰

		Baptist Vic 2006 %	Baptist Vic 2011 %	All Aus 2011 %
Pursuing a Vision				
	Agree/strongly agree that leaders are strongly focused on directions for the future	81	80	74
	Agree/strongly agree that leaders keep attenders focused on connecting with the wider community	79	80	74

⁸ Powell et al., *Enriching Church Life* 168.

⁹ Bronwyn Hughes and John Bellamy, eds., *A Passion for Evangelism: Turning Vision into Action* (Adelaide: OpenBook, 2004).

¹⁰ 2011 NCLS Operations Survey (n = 2520), 2006 NCLS Operations Survey (n = 4400); 2011 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 216,063), 2006 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 300,338).

It Takes a Team				
	Ideas of people taken into account to a great extent	NA	38	38
	Attendees' gifts and skills encouraged to a great extent	22	18	21
Communicating the Vision				
	Aware of the vision that their local church has for ministry and mission	77	75	70
	Always or usually experience preaching as very helpful to their lives	79	80	75
Turning Vision into Action				
	Attendees agree or strongly agree that leaders inspire them to action	70	71	63
	<i>Planning processes *</i>			
	Have formal plans	47	52	44
	Informal or limited plans	47	47	51
	No overall plan	6	2	5
	<i>Assistance obtained for planning *</i>			
	Denominational leaders	NA	48	40
	Denominational consultants or planners	NA	33	31
	Other consultants	NA	13	19
Don't know/not applicable	NA	24	26	
The Importance of Trust				
	Attendees agree/strongly agree that the congregation/parish has good and clear systems for how it operates	73	75	75
	Attendees agree/strongly agree that the local church leaders always communicate clearly and openly	78	81	78
Confidence that Vision can be Achieved				
	Fully or partly confident vision can be achieved	80	76	72
Commitment to the Vision				
	Aware and strongly committed	38	33	31

A Vision for Outreach

In the 2011 NCLS, as shown in Table 1, 79% of Victorian Baptist attendees agreed or strongly agreed that leaders in their local church are strongly focused on directions for the future. This was statistically significantly higher than the 74% of all attendees nationally ($p < .001$). Victorian Baptist churches are generally focused on future directions.

Campbell has his eyes set firmly on the future possibilities for Mentone Baptist. The changes he has witnessed over the last nine years have been a great encouragement, but he is convinced that it is fitting to develop a bold vision, being confident of God making resources available for its fulfilment:

I'm someone who dreams big and likes things that are beyond our current capability. We trust that God is the God of the impossible. He is committed to His church, Christ died for His church. I think it is healthy for us to dream big about local mission.

Following Jesus' commandment to "go into all the world and make disciples of all nations", the vision for churches must include a vision for mission, focused on those beyond the church. There is research-based evidence from previous National Church Life Surveys that a motivating vision is one that is focused outward, engaged with the needs of the community beyond the church.

Of all Victorian Baptist attenders, Table 1 shows that 80% agreed or strongly agreed that leaders in their local churches keep them strongly focused on connecting with people in the wider community. This was significantly more agreement than was found in the Australian churchgoing population (74%; $p < .001$). Only 4% of attenders disagreed or strongly disagreed that this community-centred focus was present (which is the same as the national figure across all churches).

It might be suggested that any vision is helpful – as long as people are invited to be involved in the vision-setting process and as long as they develop commitment to it. David Devine, head of Church Health at BUV, asks, "Could a church with a vision to stay as it is actually grow simply because people are committed to that vision?"¹¹ The overriding NCLS question asks whether people are aware and committed to the vision, goals and directions of the church, without making a value judgment of those goals. But this other leadership question about whether leaders are perceived to help the church focus on the wider community explores to what extent vision and leadership is outward-focused. All the leaders we interviewed discussed vision in outward-looking terms, expressing their hope for growth and community influence.

Armada Baptist Church faces issues common to a lot of older city churches; they have a small congregation meeting in a heritage-listed building. Many of the other churches in the area have closed but they have decided to stay. It is not easy and Waldron as pastor and the members have had to develop creativity to meet the challenges they face. One of the major changes they have made is a shift in attitude. Waldron states that it used to be a philosophy that said "when we have more people then we can serve the community". But they have turned that inside out and now focus on serving the community and building relationships. Funds were allocated to support innovative new ways of engaging with the community. This shift to focusing outside the church has helped the people at Armada to grow their faith and trust in God.

While all the churches interviewed stressed the importance of a vision being embedded within the context of mission, there were three who illustrated this particularly well. Grovedale is an aging congregation within an aging community. However rather than seeing this as a problem they have embraced their mission to people who are often isolated from or ignored by society. As Williams states many people in their community "are at a stage of life where they are either just retiring from work, or have to make other

¹¹ David Devine, Email communication (10 December 2013).

decisions about what's happening to their life, often it's a time when people review what's going on in their life and that's an opportunity to interact with people in a positive way".

One example of their commitment to the needs of their community was their willingness to spend a considerable sum on addressing accessibility issues; taking out stairs and levelling out the car park to make the building as friendly and open as possible. They also provide services requested by the community such as friendship groups and computer classes. They have partnered with Baptcare Connect to provide an opportunity for carers come together for support and friendship as well as pastoral care volunteers, who do local visitation. Beyond this they have also run a successful playgroup ministry for the past 30 years, using their gifts to provide grandparent relationships to families who may not have this support close by.

Anglesea has used their opportunity shop to focus their mission in a new direction. Rather than just being a source of revenue, it is now a place where their vision becomes action:

We see that loving God, making disciples and serving others is really well reflected in how we care for people who come to the shop, because we are a small town we get to know people and we get to know the strugglers and the battlers and those who are finding it really hard. We are able to offer respectful pastoral care, those people would not come to church but they will come to an op shop and they will build relationships with the staff the managers.

Anglesea have also moved the church office down to the op shop to show the church and the community that they really believe that this is where the practical act of loving God and serving others is taking place.

Heath McSolvin and the leadership team at AuburnLife, have a strong focus on building connections with the wider community around them. The outworking of this vision has resulted in them opening the church up every Tuesday, providing lunch, free WiFi and a comfortable space to chat or study. AuburnHub has allowed them to form relationships with students from nearby Swinburne University as well as people living in the apartment complex next door. In response to expressed needs, they now also offer conversational English classes and a homework club for local kids. They have also partnered with a local school, the chaplaincy group at Swinburne, a local cricket competition and have engaged with the Swinburne leadership institute. All of these activities have flowed out of their vision and commitment to "growing as a vibrant multicultural mission-shaped community".

It Takes a Team

A team culture is an important factor to help attenders commit to the vision. However, even if leaders agree on the value of team-based ministry it is often hard to put it into practice.

In the 2011 NCLS, as Table 1 summarises, around 38% of Victorian Baptist attenders said that their minister, pastor or priest takes the ideas of people into account to a great extent. A further 33% said ideas are taken into account to some extent. When asked "Have this congregation's/parish's leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts

and skills here?" 18% said it has happened to a great extent, 31% to some extent and 23% to a small extent. Some 29% did not feel their gifts and skills have been encouraged or they don't know.

The leadership team at Brunswick have faced many challenges in their efforts to become more inclusive. The diverse ethnic backgrounds of their congregation, issues of language, culture and the additional difficulties faced by asylum seekers, has led them to consciously foster a sense of unity through diversity. Nguyen comment:

What people have told us who come from non-Anglo cultures is that you can have your vision statement but if it's all being presented by the white people up the front it means one thing, but our meeting was facilitated by an aboriginal person and our Vietnamese pastor the implicit signal is that everybody participate here and that's what actually happened.

Brunswick has also looked beyond its church to the broader community and included issues raised by local people in their visioning discussions. When Jill Meagher was murdered in 2012 around twenty thousand people marched down Brunswick Street to protest against violence within the community. During that march many carried signs reading "We will not close with fear, we will open up with love". After seeking permission from the local man who had written this statement, Brunswick Baptist displayed it at the front of their church. This was a message from their community. As Nguyen states, "a voice from outside the church, resonated with voices from the inside and we wanted to reflect it back to the street. It shapes what we do together."

Communicating the Vision

Most people need to know where they are going before they will commit to getting on board. Effective communication of the vision goes hand in hand with commitment to it.

As noted earlier, some 75% of Victorian Baptist church attenders were aware of the vision that their local church has for the future, whereas 25% were not aware of such a vision (see Figure 2).

Preaching is another way that communicating a vision can take place. Previous NCLS research has identified that effective preaching, described as the ability to relate church teaching to attenders' daily lives, was strongly related to commitment to vision. Amongst Victorian Baptist attenders, as Table 1 summarises, 80% said they always or usually experience preaching as very helpful to their lives. This was statistically significantly higher than the figure for overall Australian attenders (75%; $p < .001$).

Mentone began the process of developing a vision in the midst of a period of change and turmoil within the church. The leadership team decided to go back to the Bible and examine, in a 6-week sermon series, God's vision for the church. Then the growth groups did a series that expanded on the themes of what was important to the early church, what is important to God and what kinds of ministries the early church engaged in. They were committed to helping the church to reflecting prayerfully, theologically and missionally on Mentone as a church and the opportunities they may have in their community. Specifically they were exploring: "how can we live out, in our context, what is important to God?"

At Grovedale they began this process with a series of sermons on visions in the Old Testament to try to help people to understand that God can speak to the church in many different ways so as to involve everybody in the congregation in understanding what God is saying to them as a church now.

A number of leaders worked with their church's existing vision statement to transfer the potential of this vision into their current situation. Some of the churches have a regular practice of re-examining their vision statement, breaking it down and asking, "what does this mean here and now?" For all the churches though, the aim is to immerse their congregation in their vision so that it becomes the background of all they do. As James Lewis, the pastor at Anglesea Baptists states: "If people remember it and refer to it in their thoughts about what kind of church we are and what kind of things we do as Christians, then that for me is a sign that the vision has stuck and it has become embedded in our DNA".

Turning Vision into Action

The Congregational Commitment Study confirmed that committed churches not only have a challenging vision, but that there is a bias to action, with clearly defined goals and objectives that are regularly evaluated. The study found:

- (1) Leaders established clear goals;
- (2) Leaders inspired people to take action;
- (3) Leaders regularly evaluated progress toward achieving their vision.¹²

It is when it comes to turning the church's vision into action most of the interviewees agreed that realistic, achievable goal setting was key. McSolvin, church secretary at AuburnLife, stressed the importance of having strong and clear action plans and success indicators:

Some of the time they are a bit hard to come up with, but that's okay, the more you wrestle with them the clearer they ultimately become. You also look at the lead and lag indicators, what are the things that are telling you that you are going in the right direction. If you have those built into your process you will do really well.

At Torquay they have worked specifically on coming up with a vision that is focused on action. Torquay's pastor Chris Rowney believes: "If our vision is too big and amorphous then it's easy to approach that in a spectator type of attitude, this is something great that will happen one day and God will do it and we will watch him do it." The team at Torquay feel that it is important to have a vision that has attainable goals and some clear steps between here and there. This creates a sense of accountability and it also fosters the belief that the vision is achievable. This, in turn, helps the congregation to see ways they can be involved and how they can contribute.

Planning Matters

Analyses of churches from the 2006 National Church Life Survey showed that there was a significant difference in levels of vision between churches that plan and churches that do not plan. Vision development is about articulating a preferred future for a church, but

¹² Hughes and Bellamy, *A Passion for Evangelism* 108.

there is a necessary related step of developing and communicating strategy – planning how to get there.

Who has plans in place?

When a local representative was asked to select the best description of the level of planning at their local church, Table 1 shows that some 19% from Victorian Baptist churches described their church as having a formal long range plan with specific strategies to achieve goals. A further 32% claimed to have a formal medium-term plan (say one year), with specific strategies to achieve goals. Another 35% said they have an informal plan reflecting the overall vision and direction of the church, but not specific strategies, whereas 12% claim to have limited short-term plans (e.g., quarterly preaching plan). Finally, some 2% stated that their church had no overall plan.

Alan Williams, a deacon at Grovedale, commented that if you end up with a lot of things going on you have to synchronise them so there are no clashes. Through proper planning, he wants to make sure everybody fits in the vision and plan, and that resources, people or facilities are not over-stretched, especially people not over-stretching to the point of burnout.

It is also critical to move from plans to action and balance them both. James Lewis at Torquay said that he has learned planning and preparation are things you can spend an awful lot of time on and never get around to taking any steps. He says planning is never just for its own sake, and that he wants his teams to ensure their resources and emotional energy are not all taken up by the planning so that there is nothing left to carry through with what is going to happen. Furthermore, he identifies the tension between faith and counting the cost: “if we knew how to do it completely on our own there is no space for God to move [and point out] ‘the place I will show you’”. Planning is important but for Lewis it is not the ‘be all and end all’, because visionary leaders plan enough that they can take the few steps but trust that God will show the rest of the steps.

Who has obtained assistance to develop plans?

Churches were asked if they had obtained assistance in developing plans for the congregation in the past five years. They were able to mark all that applied. The results are shown in Table 1. Although a quarter of participants did not know whether their church sought outside help, 48% of Victorian Baptists say their church had help from denominational leaders (more than 40% of all Australian churches), and 33% said they sourced help from denominational consultants or planners (more than 31% overall). Interestingly, only 13% said their churches had help from other consultants, less than 19% overall. In statistical tests, the Victorian Baptist distribution of results for this question was significantly different from that of all Australian churches ($p < .001$). Perhaps when Victorian Baptist churches feel the need for outside help, they turn more readily to denominational resources, or perhaps they have less access or know less about other consultants.

At Brunswick Baptist, the leaders see vision-setting as a community process. Their exercise of leadership is planning how to facilitate rather than managing from the top down. They develop time frames and review each year of the process. But as an important part of their planning process, they have decided to draw on outside help to deal with any

difficult things they identify that holds them back. Nguyen comments that part of going forward is also addressing things that have been buried, rather than saying we are in a good place and let's pretend that never happened. By using a Mennonite peace process, acknowledging that everyone is broken in some way, and examining that brokenness and discerning how to make peace with it, they have been able to bring positive elements out of difficult experiences. Comments Nguyen: "Our vulnerability and brokenness is not something that hinders our ministry but actually become a way of ministering to others."

Who is Inspired to Action?

In Victorian Baptist churches, 71% of attenders agreed or strongly agreed that leaders inspire them to action, significantly higher than the 63% of Australian churchgoers ($p < .001$). In contrast, 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remainder were neutral or unsure.

While still being small both Armadale and AuburnLife have committed to living out their vision through action. They hope by moving out into their community they will see growth but more than this they are committed to building God's kingdom in whatever form this takes and regardless of the number of people who attend their Sunday morning programs.

The allocation of funds is often a clear indicator of a church's priorities. A willingness to commit financial resources can not only facilitate initiatives vital to moving the vision statement into action but also demonstrate clearly to the church membership what is seen to be important. At Mentone they have found that the church responds very well to being given the opportunity to financially give to ministries that help them live out their vision, such as supporting the appointment of an associate pastor to help develop their small group ministry.

At Grovedale people are encouraged to do anything they feel God is leading them to do which is consistent with where the church is heading. And therefore it is easier to get people to be involved, as there is a high level of ownership of the tasks undertaken.

All of the churches feel that the most important component of turning a vision into action is time. Having the patience to allow the members time to absorb, contribute to and practice the vision is both challenging and rewarding. For example Campbell comments from his Mentone experience:

Church cultures don't change overnight, it's slow because churches are made up of people, you can set a vision but you can't expect the church to be living it out 100% in the next week, it takes time, it can take years, you have got to be prepared, while setting your vision to keep talking about it keep praying about it, but understand it's going to take time, it might take several years to really blossom.

The Importance of Trust

Building a culture of confident trust is critical to foster commitment in churches. Trust is a valuable quality in an organisation or group. It takes time to build, and can easily be eroded by poor leadership and lack of attention to interpersonal relationships. When people can't trust one another, or they can't trust the ability of their church to deliver on its vision, then commitment erodes. The findings of the CCS suggested three major issues that leaders need to address, if they want to create a church with high levels of commitment to vision:

- (1) Open and transparent communication;
- (2) Confidence that conflict will be resolved; and
- (3) Pastoral care that can be trusted.¹³

All of the participants reinforced the importance of trust. There was overall a high level of commitment to fostering and maintaining open lines of communication and both personal and institutional integrity. Each of the churches have faced difficult and sometimes damaging periods in their journey and they all acknowledge that unless these issues are faced up to and dealt with it is difficult to move forward. Trust at times must be rebuilt. Allowing people to express differences of opinions while maintaining a culture of respect can be challenging but all agree that it is worth the effort.

Wodonga's journey towards a widely embraced church vision has not been an easy one. Three years into his ministry there it became clear to the pastor Jonathan Stark and the leadership team that they needed to develop a clearly owned and defined vision. Stark comments:

At the start when we had that review, it was quite painful. But rather than getting defensive and reactive and questioning it, I shared with them that I really do want to grow and if this is what God I telling me I need to do, then I need to do it. So actually developing the vision was about realising that what we were doing was not actually helping our church grow. We need this vision.

Having the humility to work together has enabled Wodonga to develop a vision which focuses on the fullness of life in Christ. They have set this vision in the context of growth, using the images of "seed, sprout, flower and fruit" to help the church family to engage with their vision on a deeper level. Wodonga has come a long way since that first difficult review, but what has not changed is their commitment to growth. And Stark is eager to affirm that their vision for growth is focused on mission beyond themselves: "Thriving is not about just getting bigger and better and healthier yourself, but that [growth] actually leading to impacting others". The Wodonga team are about to embark on another review process using the feedback they received from their NCLS Church Life Profile. In doing this Stark hopes to model, through open and transparent communication, commitment to not only personal spiritual maturation but also looking beyond themselves.

Across Victorian Baptist churches, 75% of attenders agree or strongly agree that "this congregation has good and clear systems for how it operates" (the same as the 75% national average). Furthermore, some 81% agree or strongly agree that local church leaders "always communicate clearly and openly", significantly higher than the 78% of Australian attenders ($p = .011$).

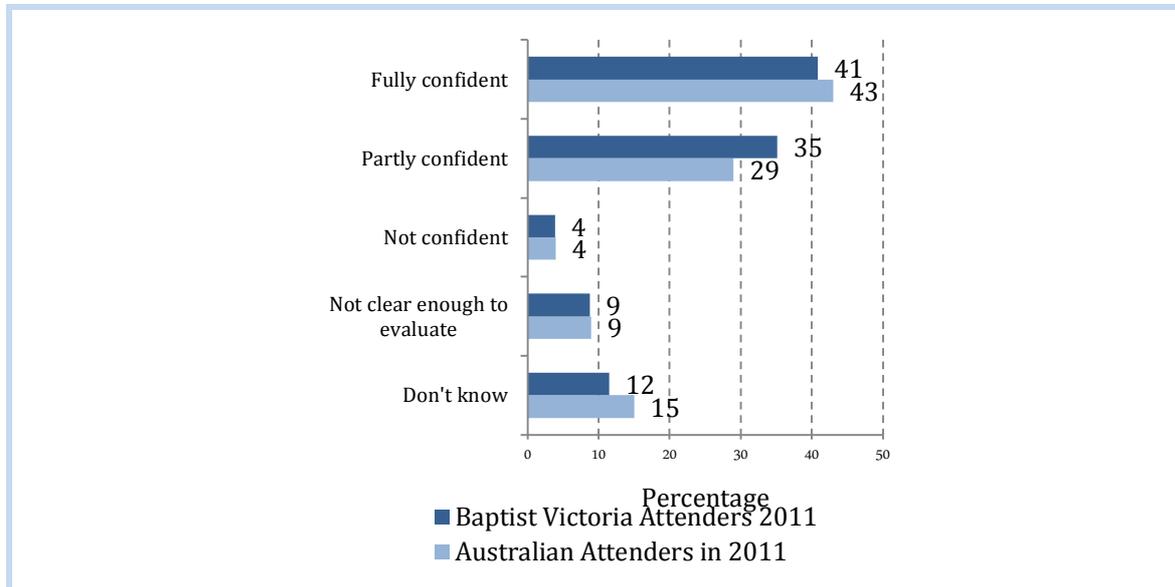
Confidence that the Vision can be Achieved

By attending to each of the stages described in Figure 3, a church can build confidence among attenders. Confidence is linked to commitment. Figure 4 shows how confident

¹³ Ibid. 145

Australian attenders are regarding the capacity of their churches to achieve the vision, goals or directions it has set itself.

Figure 4: Confidence that vision, goals or directions can be achieved¹⁴



Finding the balance between blue sky thinking and achievable goals is a challenge. While it is important to be realistic it is equally important to be willing to try new things and allow room for growth. At both Auburn and Armadale they have been careful to gauge their success by focusing on things they can do. From her experience at Armadale Waldron advises, “don’t aim for stuff that relies on somebody else doing exactly what you want because people aren’t like that, this is a church. It’s not science.”

Churches with a vision for the future put their energy into creating an environment that promotes growth through teaching, experience, practice and reflection. Openness to new ideas and mission opportunities, listening and respect, humility and enthusiasm when modelled by the leadership all help to create a culture where people feel valued and increases the sense of shared vision.

SUMMARY

The framework of this paper is a process for fostering a vision for ministry and mission, based on research presented in Hughes and Bellamy’s *Passion for Evangelism*. Results from the 2011 NCLS provide a snapshot of how effectively Australian churches and especially Victorian Baptist churches are applying this process. The quantitative data from NCLS is complemented by interview data from local Baptist churches; a methodology that could beneficially be adopted for investigating other NCLS core qualities or case studies of other denominations or churches. The effectiveness of a vision begins with its formation. Creating an environment where all can contribute to, shape and form the vision increases a sense of belonging and ownership. These then build into clear and purposeful action as

¹⁴ 2011 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 216,063).

the church as a whole knows where they are going and can articulate how they will get there. Moving out of the church and into the community, using the gifts and skills God has given them, they become God's hands and feet on earth. With a clear understanding of what makes a church who they are and what God is calling them to, inspiration and innovation follows. The vision of a church becomes no longer just a document to be completed and filed away; it becomes the very outworking of the church's DNA.

Appendix: Semi structured interview guide questions

Develop a compelling vision

1. Why do you think is it important to have a clear vision? What impact does it have on your ministry?
2. How have you developed the vision at your church? Describe the process
3. When have you been at your best in fostering a sense of team/participation in creating vision?

Commitment to the vision

4. When have you been at your best in creating a sense of ownership of vision? How have you done this?
5. How do you inspire people to embrace the vision for your church?
6. In what ways have you communicated this vision to your members most successfully?
7. What methods have you used to communicate your vision? Which have been most successful?
8. In what ways does your church demonstrate its commitment to your vision?

Maintaining commitment to the vision: turning your vision into action

9. What does it take to turn a vision into action?
10. What role does successful planning play in turning vision into action?
 - a. How do you go about making plans based on your vision?
 - b. Describe the process of planning?
 - c. Have you ever sought outside input? What did that look like?
11. How have you established/maintained high levels of trust between the congregation and the leadership team?
 - d. In what ways do you foster open and transparent communication?

Fulfillment: the action taken

12. How do you develop a vision that can be achieved?
 - a. Why is it important to develop a vision that is seen to be achievable?
 - b. What hinders this? What makes it happen?
13. In what ways have you turned your vision into action?
14. How do you gauge how successful you have been at turning your vision into action?

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