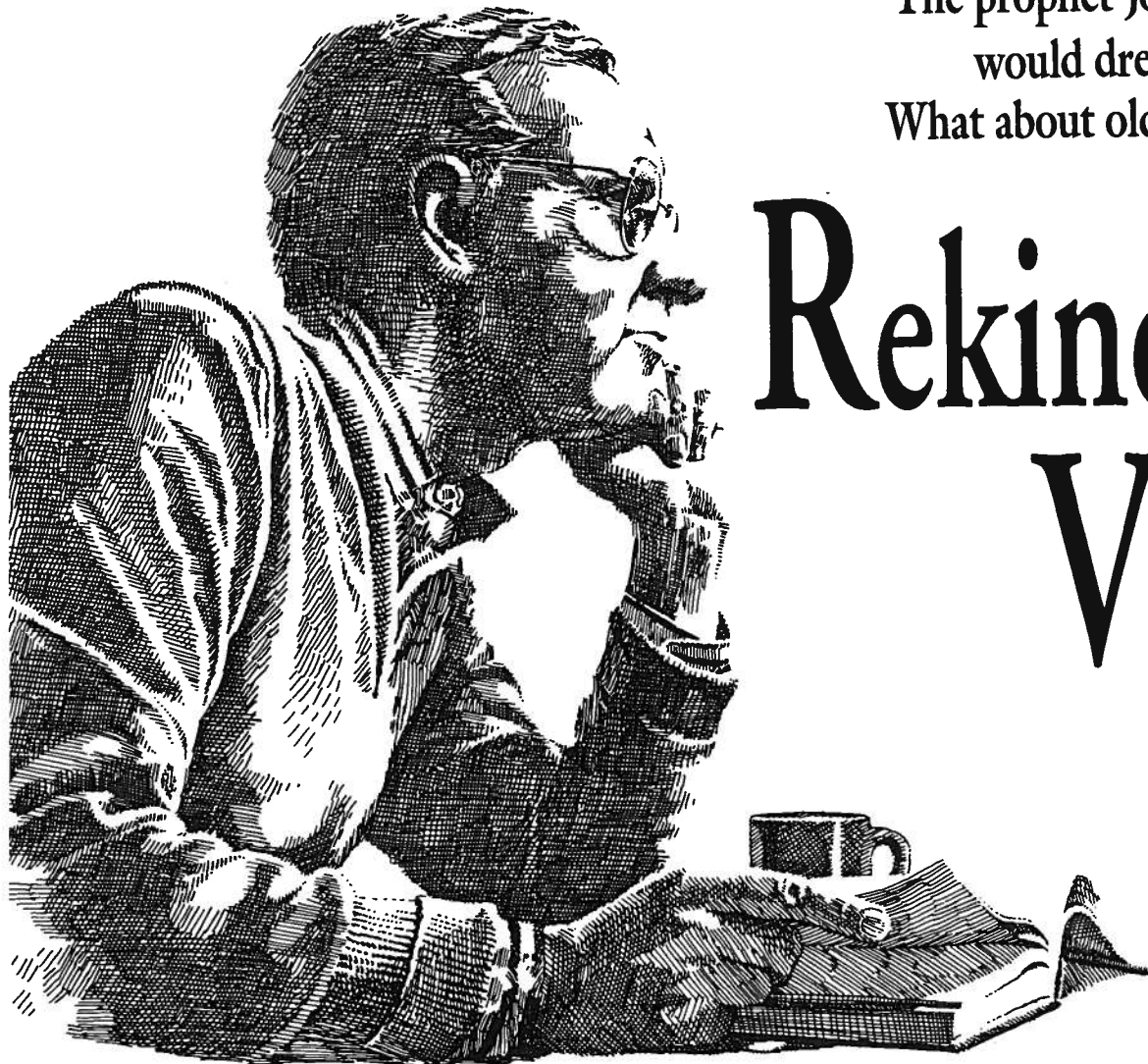


The prophet Joel said old men  
would dream dreams.  
What about old congregations?



# Rekindling Vision in an

# Established Church

## Leadership Classics

*"The leader who gets too far in front of his people is often mistaken for the enemy," says Dennis Sawyer, quoting an old adage to describe how he feels about this article, first published in LEADERSHIP's Winter 1984 issue. Obviously, this is a man who wants to see pastors lead the charge without getting shot in the back.*

*The first readers of this article responded so enthusiastically, we knew we'd have to include it in our series of classics. But after a decade and his move from the Midwest to Seattle, we asked Sawyer if the lessons still proved helpful in sparking a vision.*

*"No, not helpful," he responded. "I'd say imperative. Serving a different church in a different region has only reinforced what I'd learned, especially the concept that everyone needs to be needed."*

*Sawyer continued, "Building relationships is more important than vision. It's through relationships that you inspire and encourage. Without relationships nothing happens."*

The warmth of the autumn sun through the bedroom window aided my mellow reflection. Sunday afternoon naps were a luxury of this interval in my life. I had resigned a productive but stressful pastorate ten months before to slow down, do some thinking, and await further direction.

The phone rang. I reached across the bed to answer it.

Eric Pearson introduced himself as an elder of Philadelphia Church in Chicago, two thousand miles away, and then inquired whether I would be interested in candidating for the position of pastor.

I took a deep breath. "Before I answer that, Eric," I replied, "I need to ask two questions. First, are you planning to stay in the inner city or move to the suburbs? Second, if you opt for staying, are you willing to make the necessary changes to reach the community for Christ?"

"I can answer both of those now if you like."

"Actually, I'd prefer an official response from the church leadership," I said. My insistence grew out of what I knew about this particular congregation. It had begun under the name *Filadelfia Forsamlingen* in November 1925, in a storefront building three blocks south of Wrigley Field. A haven for Swedish immigrants, it had named itself after the mother church in Stockholm. For the first fifteen years, almost all of its services were in Swedish.

The church had grown steadily, made the transition to English, moved into a large building easily seating seven hundred — and filled every seat. But in more recent times, things had changed. An aver-

age Sunday morning was now less than 200. The neighborhood was still called "Andersonville," but as you walked along Clark Street, the few remaining Swedish bakeries were widely separated by Korean, Thai, Mexican, Japanese, and Lebanese restaurants. Senn High School nearby was alleged to be the most diverse student body in the nation, averaging between forty-nine and fifty-two nationalities attending. Many of the church's third-generation Swedes now lived in Evanston, Skokie, or Niles, leaving behind the second-generation stalwarts, some new residents from the area, and a few "colorful" urban types.

Was there a future to match the notable past of this congregation?

Eric Pearson called back a few days later to convey the leadership's response: "We want to stay in the city, and we are willing to make the necessary changes."

The only remaining question was whether I had enough of what God needed to lead this fifty-six-year-old church into the 1980s.

### Learning the Hard Way

If so, the lessons of the previous six years would have to be maximized. Our church in the small village of Hammond, Oregon, had grown from 150 to more than 600 during that time, with Easter crowds of up to 1,200 — but not without periodic upheavals. I remember the quarterly business meeting where I suggested that qualifications for membership be clearly stated in the constitution, not simply left to verbal tradition. The atmosphere soon became electric. Verbiage flew back and forth across the room like a meeting of the Teamsters union. *Maybe this church needs a different pastor*, I mused, *someone who doesn't care about the future*. It became the kind of night that knots your stomach and makes you promise you'll never try to initiate another change as long as you live. The establishment reactions were the usual:

"I like it the way it is."

"I don't think it's necessary."

"I heard about a church that did something like this, and it was a disaster."

And then, of course, the old standby: "We've never done it that way before."

In spite of resistance, we made progress. I had begun as the only paid staff person, and we gradually grew to five full-time pastors. But the repeated struggles over ingredients of the vision — going to two Sunday morning services, for example, or divid-

**DENNIS SAWYER**

ing the midweek service into home meetings, or enlarging the staff — drained me and often damaged individuals in the congregation. Eventually I grew tired enough to resign the church, take a job teaching public school, and try to analyze the successes and failures of my leadership style.

Any kind of growth in any kind of church, I saw, would require constant change. I began seeking for “natural birthing” procedures that would allow future changes to be more positive, less painful. What wisdom could I take with me to the next pastorate?

The call to Chicago was the test of whether I had learned anything. I would be only the second non-Scandinavian pastor in the church’s long history. But they said they were ready for a new vision. How would it go?

My family and I have just begun our third year of ministry here. The church has grown steadily since our arrival, and the congregation exhibits a multiplicity that matches the neighborhood. There’s an air of excitement and expectancy. The fact that transitions have been smooth can be largely attributed, at least from where I sit, to the following:

### The Lesson of the Printing Press

Back in Oregon, I had come to the deacon board one night with an irresistible bargain. “A single-lever, self-washing offset press in good condition for only \$500 — we’d be crazy to pass it up.” I cajoled until finally I convinced them we couldn’t live without this soul-saving boon to literature evangelism, and they would be wise men to authorize the purchase.

It never occurred to me that to utilize an offset press, one should first secure an operator. Five years later, the press still stood unused in the attic, a silent reminder that church leaders must promote qualified *people* with a vision, not just good ideas or programs. A bus without a driver, an audiovisual library without a librarian, an organ without an organist is worthless. My best idea, plan, or solution is void of life until shouldered by a person with a genuine vision of how God could use it to further his kingdom.

When we support the person with a burden, we

reflect the current concern of the congregation, not the burden of someone who died ten years before. If the burden dies, we should let the program die a quiet death as well. Otherwise, some well-meaning member of the church (or the pastor!) will be exhausted trying to maintain something for which he or she has no heart. This not only wastes valuable resource people but prevents them from enthusiastically entering an area of ministry for which they are perfectly suited.

I didn’t necessarily want a preschool in the Oregon church, but Jan Rea did. She and her husband visited our service while they were camping at Fort Stevens State Park nearby. I remember shaking hands at the door, and Jan asking if we had ever thought about having a preschool. I said we would if we had a person with a vision for such a ministry. The next Sunday as they were leaving she brought up the subject again, only a bit more fervently. I gave the same answer, and they left us to return to their home in Arizona.

I was surprised to see them again late that summer. I asked how they were able to take another vacation so soon.

“Oh, we’re not on vacation,” Jan replied. “We’ve moved here so we can start a preschool; we just love the church.”

I outlined all the problems and resistance she might encounter, but she was undaunted. I had to admit she was capable. She had soon done all the research on community needs, licensing, building codes, and so forth. She made presentations to various civic groups, the church board, and committees. She and her husband even dug the post holes for the needed fence.

The truth is that for more than five years now, that church has had a successful preschool because it has had Jan Rea.

Meanwhile, it’s still waiting for a press operator. . . .

*Axiom:* In rekindling vision, support people, not programs.

### The Lesson of the Chandelier

This lesson came not from pastoring but from my earlier days as a teacher. I had been hired as a “specialist” to bring order to a junior high class that had already gone through four teachers in three weeks.

As the principal led me into the room, I caught sight of one particular student amid the chaos. From his perch on the bookcase, he sprang upward, caught the light fixture, and trapezed out into the room, dropping to the floor.

“Students, this is your new teacher, Mr. Sawyer,” said the principal, and quickly retreated.



Dennis Sawyer is pastor of Church by the Side of the Road, Seattle, Washington.

# Church leaders must promote qualified people with a vision, not just good ideas or programs.

Where should I begin?

So many things needed changing *instantly*, but some were of higher priority than others. It simply would not do for me to call out "Hey! You on the chandelier, spit out your gum!" I had to prioritize the needed changes, starting with the most obvious or intolerable, and work down the list. Gum chewing would be somewhere near the bottom.

The new pastor of an established church quickly sees many changes that must occur if the church is to regain its vibrancy. But everything can't be overhauled at once. If we take time to think through the problems and prioritize them, we will make far more headway.

A friend of mine came to a church whose building was in poor condition. Paint was peeling inside and out. The carpeting was so worn that it was actually a hazard to women wearing dress shoes. Noisy folding chairs were used instead of pews.

The wise newcomer knew he couldn't change everything. He elected to try to inspire one very visual change, in the hope that everything else would look so shabby by comparison that people would then clamor for a transformation. He asked the church board for permission to form a committee to investigate the *possible* need for new carpeting.

The selected committee agreed that such a need existed. A new committee began studying how much of the building to recarpet. A different committee decided quality and cost. The final committee, based on the recommendations of the others, selected the color. By this time, nearly everyone in the church had taken part in the Great Carpet Project.

Soon after its installation, people began to paint, scrub, redecorate, and repair. They even purchased pews. An air of excitement and change blew like a fresh breeze through every area of church life.

*Axiom:* For effective change, prioritize carefully.

## The Lesson of the Lighted Cross

When I was only twelve years old, my pastor came to me with a serious statement: "Dennis, I have a problem, and I think you're the only person who can

help." I was dumbstruck. Here I had been coming to Brookside Baptist Church in Oakland, California, just a few months and was the only church attender in my family. What could Reverend Appleberry possibly need me for?

With deep lines of concern in his face, he convinced me that no one else in the church could possibly be entrusted with the task of watching from the back pew for his secret signal, then creeping silently out the sanctuary doors, down through the basement, back up the baptistry steps, and turning on the switch to illuminate the cross while the Sunday evening congregation sang its customary benediction, "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross."

I didn't even know people *went* to church at night. Nevertheless, I accepted the job, and for nearly five years I assumed my assigned seat on the last pew, awaiting my secret signal. Of course, I was also drafted into the youth choir, helped in the Sunday school, attended youth meetings, and grew spiritually. The church became my ballast as I navigated the stormy teenage years.

Wise old Pastor Appleberry knew that everyone needs to feel important.

Here in Chicago, there's a faithful member named Sigrid Peterson. We know she's somewhere in her eighties; she doesn't tell her exact age. She sang in the choir until just a few years ago, when it became difficult for her to stand for long periods of time. But she needed to be needed. That was when I began hunting for a genuine need (not a make-work job) she could handle. Sigrid now has a mail receptacle in the church with her name on it. All intrachurch correspondence goes to her for delivery before and after the Sunday services. She has an important task — important to us, and most of all, important to her. She is part of the new vision at Philadelphia Church.

*Axiom:* Everyone needs to be needed.

## The Lesson of the Keys

Several years ago in Hammond, a young man named Danny volunteered to take care of the church lawn. I gave him a set of keys to the building and storage areas and told him his offer was greatly appreciated. He began doing an excellent job.

Then one day, I found him digging up the front lawn.

"Say, Danny, ahh, what's going on?"

"Oh — I was hoping you wouldn't see this till I'd finished. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Yes, well, it's still quite a surprise. What are you doing?"

"I got this great idea," he explained. "Wouldn't it look great if we had a large cross of flowers growing here, surrounded with white rocks and log ends?"



"It's called 'The Be-All-Things-to-All-People Exercise Program.' "

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I've already bought the rocks and flowers. Don't worry — I used my own money, so nobody could complain."

I began listing in my mind all the people who, along with me, would not be excited about Danny's landscaping. But wait a minute — it was Danny's

## The difference between manipulation and leadership is *motive*.

responsibility to see that the area was well groomed, and he was volunteering the time and energy.

At that moment I created a homespun piece of church algebra: Responsibility + Time + Energy = Privilege.

That served me well when George approached me one day and stated he didn't like the location of the Sunday school picnic. I asked him if he'd like to be the picnic chairman the next year. No, he wasn't

really interested in that.

"Well," I responded, "generally it's my feeling that the person willing to shoulder the responsibility should have the privilege of making most of the key decisions."

Yes, there must be guidelines and limits, but in general, this approach turns on a congregation. People in Hammond began saying "my church" instead of "the church." There was a marked increase in volunteering, and that's when we began handing out keys by the dozen. Laverne needed one so she could arrange the altar flowers late on Saturday afternoons. Francis needed a key to have her bread and coffee warm before Sunday school. Delbert needed a key because he wanted to relieve the custodian from "doing windows." Eighty percent of the new activity was valuable body ministry; 10 percent was all right but nothing special; the remaining 10 percent required close monitoring, correction, and sometimes cancellation. But it was worth it.

The giving of keys not only enhances feelings of ownership and commitment, but it also dilutes the established pockets of power in a church. In my present church, we probably have more than forty keys outstanding — which is crazy, given our inner-

city location. But people are changing, learning how to work together, exercising patience and forbearing one another in love.

*Axiom:* Responsibility + Time + Energy = Privilege.

### The Lesson of the Platform

If the vision is valid, if the cause is just, it will often demand a hearing on its own. The best idea in the world, if presented prematurely, takes a great deal more effort to bring to fruition. But when people discover a need themselves, they feel a greater sense of responsibility to rectify the situation.

When Wes Niles became the Oregon church's first minister of music, he did an excellent job of building up the ministry. Several times he said to me, "Pastor, we can no longer fit the choir, orchestra, piano, organ, and pulpit on the platform and still have room for you and me to function. You've got to get the deacons to remodel the platform."

Finally I said, "Wes, as soon as you can, try to use both the choir and the orchestra together on a Sunday morning."

"They'll never fit, Pastor — that's what I've been trying to tell you. I haven't used them together for months."

"I know," I said. "But just squeeze them together anyway."

He gave me an exasperated look. "You're going to have people and music stands falling all over the place. There won't be any room for you at all!"

"I know — but go ahead anyway. I'll sit on the first pew instead."

We followed my suggestion, and I must admit things were pretty chaotic. But before the week was out, several deacons stopped by with rough sketches of how the platform might be expanded to accommodate the growing needs of the music department.

On the other hand, I pushed that church into adopting a much-needed new constitution. It took months of heated discussion. People just didn't see how the old system of checks and balances were too cumbersome for a growing church. The new constitution, when finally approved, streamlined the decision-making process, but the cost was high.

Here in Chicago, the same changes were needed. I wrote a new constitution more than a year ago, gave it to the elders — and now I am waiting. We still function under the old document. Whenever I can, I point out how much easier a procedure would be the new way. Lately,

the elders have been pushing to get the new constitution approved and operational. The impetus is not the fact that the pastor wants it but rather that growth is demanding it.

The key to getting a nursery remodeled is to outgrow it. If your nursery is already overcrowded and the decision-makers don't seem to care, make sure they (or their wives) have the opportunity to serve a few nursery duties. Additional people create the need for enlarged vision by their very presence. Thus, evangelism is not the only result of a church's vision; it can also be the goad. As you bring in the unchurched from your community, their mere presence casts many things in a new light.

*Axiom:* Battling for change is less productive than letting the need become obvious.

None of the above is meant to demean the power of direct proclamation as an instrument for change. I believe in openly sharing my vision for the church and community. I work it into sermons, prayers, fellowship times, and casual conversations. As James reminds us in writing about the tongue, "A tiny rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot wants it to go, even though the winds are strong" (3:4, LB).

Some may think this is manipulation, but it is not — it's leadership. The difference between manipulation and leadership is *motive*. Yes, if I want a big church, if I want a large Sunday school, if I want convert totals to notch into the spine of my leather Bible, it is manipulation. But if my motive is solely that the Lamb receive the reward of *his* suffering, that is leadership.

The first-grade teacher does not complain that the children do not know how to read. He teaches and inspires. He builds their self-esteem and helps them see their potential. By his words, he opens up a whole new world. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21).

So we teach that everyone has a place in the body of Christ. We teach that everyone has been gifted in some way for the benefit of the whole church. We teach that everyone is important to God. We also teach that Christians often work themselves out of a current job in order to move on to something more. We train our replacements, thus seeding greater growth in the future.

Rekindling vision in an established church is not just a matter of following a recipe. It is a developing of relationships — between the people and God, between the pastor and people, between one Christian and another, and between the church and the waiting world — to be the force God envisions to do his work. □