

PERSPECTIVES ON OUR VISION PROCESS

Jared Jones, Scot Headley, & Priscilla Lowery

To me, our 'visioning process' has been a chance to reconnect with how we think of ourselves as a church. Facing a limited budget always hurts, especially when the budget represents hard-working friends who depend on us to provide for their families. I wish that, instead of trying to figure out where to trim, we could release our staff more completely than we've been able to.

Meanwhile, I've appreciated the chance to review our existing mission statement and find that it still expresses who we are and want to be--and to find room within in to strengthen some areas of our community life. I've cherished intentional worship that leaders have made central to the process and the prayerful attitudes of those involved. I'm hopeful that we're in the middle of 'preparing our minds for action' that may take us deeper into Scriptural study and living, into godly interdependence and outreach. I don't love to sit in meetings, but I've found this work changing me and I think it's changing us as a church. I think this is what a local church does as part of and on its way to ministry.

-Jared Jones

As I reflect on the visioning process that we are engaged in as a community, I am reminded that congregations are like fruit trees. Jesus told us in Matthew 7:18-20: ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. “

It is interesting to me that Jesus reminds us that a bad tree is cut down and thrown into the fire, but does not here describe the treatment that the good tree receives. Those of you who raise fruit trees know that it is a long and involved process and requires a lot of work. Even good fruit trees go through times of cutting back, but not cutting down. In order to be productive, trees are pruned, watered, fertilized, protected from cold and guarded from insects and disease. These actions on the part of a grower require planning, persistence, skill and patience.

I liken our current process of visioning to the process that a successful fruit grower goes through to bring a good crop. There is a need for commitment, diligence, trust and patience. I encourage each of us to seek God's direction for North Valley. Although it may appear that we are the growers, it is clear that ultimately God is our grower. Jesus said in John 15: 1-3: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.“ We are under the care of our Father in heaven, who can and will shape our process of discerning and visioning, if we seek after him.

I don't believe that our seeking and recognition are meant to excuse us from doing work ourselves, as this is work. In like manner we will do the work of planning, assessing, information gathering and decision making. I believe God will use our people with our gifts and abilities to listen, to share and to respond to what God is speaking into our lives. I am thankful that the picture of a good fruit tree reminds us that we are not being cut down, but that we are being shaped in order to be fruitful. What better aim could we have as a community than to bear fruit for God's purposes?

- Scot Headley

When I was first asked to write my impressions of the visioning meeting I thought it would be easy. Then I began to THINK about the meeting and all the colorful wall drawings. I stewed. I dismissed. I complained that I had nothing to say. I almost called Bruce and said I can't do it. I was paralyzed until a friend simply told me to tell the truth of my heart. So this is the truth of my impressions, which may be very different from others who attended.

To begin, the visioning process was meant to illuminate who we are as a body; where we are right now; where we want to go; and then set us on the road for how to get there. Overwhelming, eh? I thought so.

The first impression I formed was one of *who* we are. I can clearly say that North Valley is a profoundly thoughtful group of human beings all striving to live out Christ's ministry in their lives. We love God, we love our children, we are all seeking to grow spiritually, and it seems that real ministry is happening all around us. Who wouldn't want to be able to say this about his or her faith community?! So, my first impression of the visioning was good and simply reaffirmed what I already knew to be true about all the folks I've grown to love and deeply care about.

My next impression is where the reality sets in: the paper with the pictures of *where* we are currently. North Valley folks are tired and stretched. Looking at the poster reminded me of when I worked for Mt. Angel Middle School. At my interview, the principal made it clear that teachers at a small school are required to wear many hats. He wasn't kidding. At the end of 5 years I was coaching track, basketball, the odyssey of the mind program; running a recycling club, and a part of countless committees and programs. Add to this my 45 minute commute and I began to feel unbalanced & stretched. Am I still working there? No. It was unsustainable once little boys were added to my life. Being in a small community with high aspirations; one can expect this to happen. The question for me is: "If many of the people at North Valley are feeling stretched and perhaps unbalanced then what are we going to do about it?" What is causing it? We don't want people to leave because they feel stretched. Are money problems really the root cause of that feeling? Will we cut back? Isn't church supposed to be a place that keeps us connected to community, feeling nourished by Christ's teachings and love... balanced, so that we may then go out and take that ministry into our families, work, and beyond? Therefore, my second impression looks more like a flashing yellow light of warning that says, "**Look out folks, pay attention here to what's happening!**" I don't know where to go with that impression, but feel some truth here.

My third impression, about where we want to be in 2011, is that we set our goals too high. We had too many listed and I feel stretched just thinking about them, wondering who will have the time to sit on a committee to think those through. It really makes me want to bury my head. (inner mind: "Don't these people realize they're just making more work for themselves? Are those goals really going to make us feel less stretched? Help!") I keep wanting only one goal to be there: Not feeling financially stretched so that we can maintain a healthy pastoral staff and good education programs. This seems like a great goal and that if we achieve it all those other goals (like diversity) will fall into place with God's timing. (Inner mind: "One goal people. One goal!") Take me to task on this if you like, but remember this article was only meant to be an impression.

Lastly, here are my hopes:

That we keep in mind that "Christ is the head of, the body, the church." (1 Col 18-19). If we can do this, well then folks, we should have no trouble getting along and proceeding in a balanced and loving way. My

hope is that Christ will sustain us through change and that we find our church sanctuary a refueling station for our souls rather than the place that stretches us beyond balance. (Inner mind: “No buried heads here, people....just lifted spirits.”)

My final hope for our body is that our pastoral staff will be blessed with health and balance. I cannot help but believe that some of the stretched feelings and lack of direction stem directly from the illness that Stan has been battling. The pastors are the hub for communication, planning, discernment, care, and leadership. One of our pastors is ill; one is back in school, and the other is picking up a lot of loose ends while working another job. Perhaps we were all being so polite at the visioning meeting that these great challenges to our leadership were left off the wall chart, but for me it was there between the lines. I know that as Quakers we are all ministers and leaders, but most of us are out working other jobs and so it is vital that the “hub” be healthy and whole. This is where I keep feeling the call to pray. Perhaps, this is the most important thing we can all be doing right now. Praying for our pastors.

I leave you with 1 Col 3:9 & 11 “For we are laborers together with God; ye are God’s cultivated field, ye are God’s building. For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” When I go back to my first impression about who we are at North Valley and how much we love God and desire to do God’s work; I know we have the right foundation. Trust and pray and be patient. Let’s move forward with God’s leading on this path and trust in His power. If we start to feel like burying our heads then that may be a sign that we’re off the path. Let’s journey on, friends.

-Priscilla Lowery