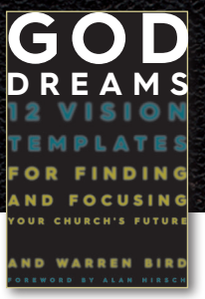
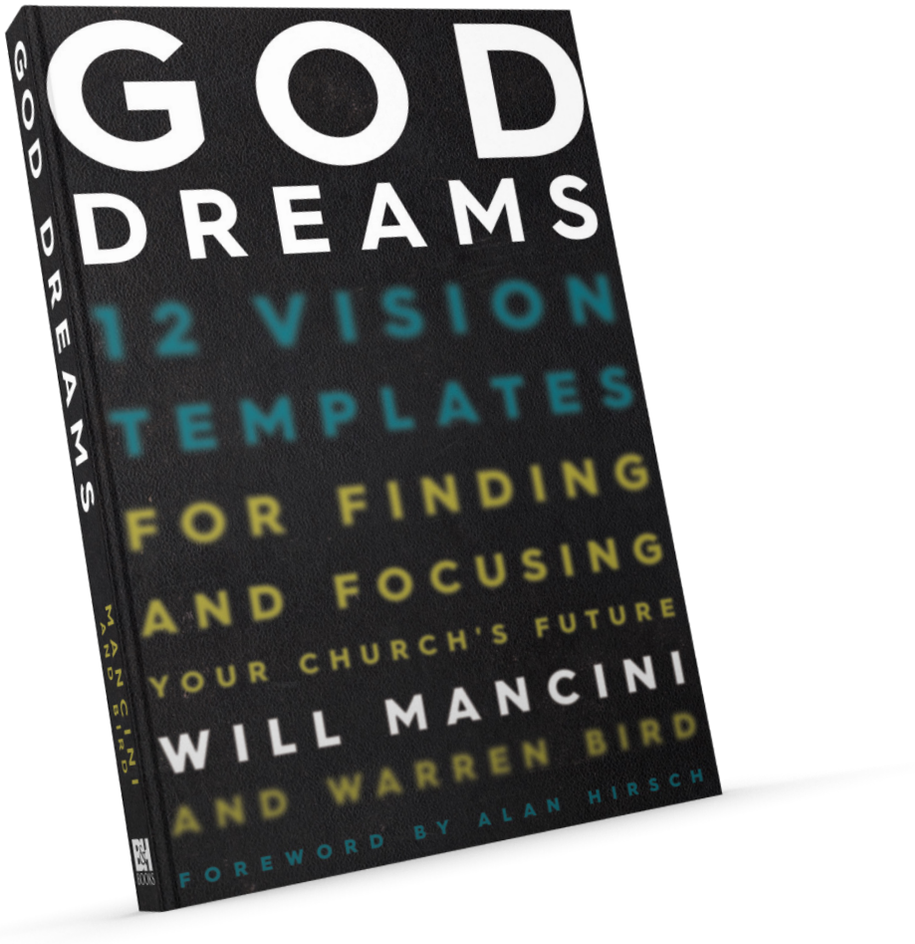


Chapter 1
Pursuing God Dreams



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Chapter 1
Pursuing God Dreams

> *Imagination is the voice of daring. If there is anything Godlike about God it is that. He dared to imagine everything.*
>
> —Writer Henry Miller

I dream, you dream, we all dream God Dreams.

If you were ever excited about something that's yet to be, then you are a visionary. In its elemental form, being a visionary is simply sharing about an event or development that you are looking forward to.

As it turns out, God is a visionary too. He has dreams that include an extraordinary plan for your church (Eph. 3:20). And I believe His better future for your ministry is meant to be discovered and expressed. When these ideas come alive in your imagination and bring wonder to others, that's vision.

If God does have dreams for your church, how do you really know what they are?

Let's explore this question under four banners: vision as a human thing, vision as a God thing, vision as a relationship-with-God thing, and vision as a church thing. I hope these four perspectives bring you some new insight on an increasingly neglected topic in church leadership today. Let's kick-start our thinking about vision!

I'll offer a fuller definition of vision in chapter 3, but for now think of vision simply as a dream of a better future.

Vision Is a Human Thing

What are you looking forward to? Please personalize the question. Maybe it's . . .

- Taking a vacation next month?

- Sleeping in this Saturday?
- Completing the semester at school?
- Buying a bigger house?
- Seeing your first grandbaby?
- Watching the big game?

If you can identify with one or more of these questions, then you reveal an important dimension about being human: we are by nature future-oriented people. We live in the present, but we think about time in front of us.

With few exceptions, we all have things we look forward to. It's a standard feature that came with your God-created body and brain. More than that, it's a natural part of getting through any day and of anticipating another day to come.

We all hope for, dream of, look forward to, and even count on a better future.

Welcome to the human race. Or maybe I should say, welcome to the humans racing into the future.

Now consider this: Why is it a gift from God that we can look forward to something?

I have asked this question to hundreds of church leaders. It really is an interesting question to ponder. Here are some of the responses I've heard:

Looking forward . . .

- Creates energy on a team.
- Provides hope in difficult times.
- Pushes us to be our best.
- Deepens our dependence on God.
- Reminds us of the payoff of hard work.
- Defines the significance of our lives.
- Leverages the power of focus.
- Gives meaning to the mundane.
- Fuels progress toward our goals.

It is essential for ministry leaders to develop a top-of-mind competency to apply vision into their daily ministry.

The list could keep going. Looking forward offers endless benefits.

But why is the exploration of this question so important as you and I kick off a book with a title like *God Dreams*? Because experiencing vision is foundational to what it means to be human. Therefore, it is essential, not optional, for ministry leaders to develop a top-of-mind competency to apply vision into their daily ministry. Here are six reasons:

1. **Vision serves people.** Spending time on vision embodies servant leadership. It is a humble act of service—even caring—to help people look forward to what God wants to happen.

   Can leaders use vision for selfish means? Of course. But that doesn't diminish the human need for hope and progress when appropriately addressed by spiritual leaders. Don't let abuse by the few cause you to reject visionary work as being either elitist or arrogant.
2. **Vision is for everyone.** Having vision is natural for everybody. It doesn't require some super gifting to approach the subject. It's not just for advanced-level leaders. It's for you and me and Maria and Joey. It's for our first-time guests at church. It's for small groups in crowded living rooms or coffee talks just between two people. It's something to explore with the kids.
3. **Vision is for every day.** Vision is always relevant. It's not a special-occasion annual message. It's not even a scheduled thing. It's a vital part of every day. Just as we breathe, eat, and sleep, we also pray, hope, and dream. Vision works when I am at work. It comes into play when I'm playing.
4. **Vision is fun.** Vision is actually a lot of fun. It's not something we must do; it's something we get to do. It brings a bounce to your step. It brightens a room with smiles. Who doesn't want to climb a ladder to slide down a slide? Who doesn't want to put gas in the car to drive farther or faster? Who doesn't want to talk about the future in order to look forward to it even more?

   Okay, maybe one time you had to sit through a boring lecture on organizational leadership. Or maybe you endured a crusty strategic planning process. It might not have been fun. Don't fault vision itself. I bet the problem was something else.
5. **Vision makes us better.** When we imagine things better, we are better people. Vision improves us in ways we can readily recognize. Vision is instinctively noble. It connects with God in a mysterious way.

   Sure, we have bad days. We all grumble and complain at some point. We have weak moments when we overrate the past. But most of the time we're looking up and looking ahead. Most of the time we want to win. A sense of vision makes us want to be our best both individually and together.
6. **Vision is ongoing.** Finally, the work of vision is never done. If vision is so closely tied to being human, it's also tied to time. And time keeps moving. Most days build on yesterday's vision. We are constantly moving, evaluating, progressing, and recalculating. The view in a moving car is always changing. Just because we talked about vision last week, last month, or last year doesn't mean we are done talking about it.

These six simple attributes of vision remind us that vision is an inherent part of being human and therefore something everyone can relate to—whether they believe in God or whether they are part of a church.

Now let's consider another angle: the idea of vision from God's perspective.

Vision Is a God Thing

The first moment the concept of vision really grabbed me had nothing to do with organizational leadership in ministry. It was simply about God.

I was taking a theology class (it was named "Trinitarianism," a word I haven't used since!) at Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Lanier Burns, one of my favorite professors, blessed me immensely by expanding my view of God. One night a burning question melted my mind. The next day I sought relief in class. With my foot tapping and mind racing, I raised my hand to launch my question. "Dr. Burns, is Adam's situation after the fall *better* than before the fall?"

That's it: a simple question about Adam and Eve messing things up. What was God actually up to with His grand plan to redeem humanity? And would the final result be better than the original state? I had a hunch that God was doing something bigger than returning back to Eden's "business as usual," even if it was perfect there. But how do you improve on perfect? Dr. Burns then confirmed my hunch. He immediately replied, "Redeemed Adam is *better off* than pre-fall Adam."

After hearing that statement, I have never been the same. From that moment on, my thoughts of vision for the local church always push me back to the heart of God.

Here's how my professor's answer translates: In every circumstance of our lives and every sentence of Scripture, our God is a visionary God. He can turn the worst dilemma into eternal victory. That's just what God did with Adam's fall: "For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. . . . For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:15, 17).

For Adam and Eve as well as for you and me, God gives us a taste of grace and takes us to a better place, better than if we had never sinned. Wow.

God's plans scan every detail of our lives, starting before our birth. As the psalmist says: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. . . . Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps. 139:13, 16).

God describes creation as something "very good" (Gen. 1:31) only later to recreate a more dazzling future. He prioritizes the unfolding of something even better: God plans our transformation in this world and our resurrection in the world to come.

Scripture shows the pattern of redemptive history: creation then fall then redemption. But we often don't emphasize that new creation is better than first creation. Or to spell it out exactly: the promises of God and the faith of God's people take us from creation to better-than-creation restoration. As the Bible says, this transformation makes us new creatures, a new creation: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The Message interprets this same verse: "Anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new."

In the interim God even allows evil so that He can make an end run around evil's best strategy and then transform it into a greater good. You might call it a divine-crazy good.

Do bad, awful, and painful things continue to plague planet Earth? Of course they do. But God is still a visionary. And in the final day, as J. R. R. Tolkien so beautifully voiced in *The Lord of the Rings,* "Everything sad is going to come untrue."[1]

As Revelation 21:4–5 summarizes: "'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"

The grand finale of the first created universe becomes a most glorious "Revelation 21 day." It's a wedding day but not just any couple's celebration. It's the wedding day of all wedding days and the one that every wedding day in history points toward. It's the presentation of God's people—as a holy and purified bride—to Jesus Christ, the worthy and eternally handsome groom. It comes with a new house as well; we will dwell in the new heavens and new earth. Genesis started with a marriage in a perfect garden between Adam and Eve; Revelation will end with a perfect marriage reimagined beyond our imaginations, between God and humanity.

So the bookends of Scripture, the two utopias of Genesis 1–2 and Revelation 21–22, reveal the visionary nature of our God. And only God could create the final utopia better than the first.

The utopias of Genesis and Revelation reveal the visionary nature of our God.

We just can't escape the fact that God is a visionary in this sense: He is always describing, creating, and leading us into a better future.

Vision Is a Relationship-with-God Thing

It's one thing to propose that God has a vision and wants each church to make progress toward it. But it's even more amazing to imagine that God invites us into His world of creating that progress.

If you have ever had a dream of a better future, it was probably an idea first in the mind of God. Let's call it a God Dream. And you and I dream because God dreams.

God invites us into His world of creating that progress.

- Have you ever looked forward to a vacation as a time of refreshment and recreation? Maybe that was a God Dream.
- Did you start a missional community to reach people most churches were overlooking? Maybe that was a God Dream.
- Did you ever imagine a moment of compassion for someone before you acted? Maybe that was a God Dream.
- Did you project an 8 percent increase for next year's ministry operating budget? Maybe that was a God Dream.

Think about what it means to bear the image of God: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27).

Because God is a visionary and human beings are visionaries in His image, the idea of vision becomes a powerful and practical thing to our daily lives. When we walk with God, two visionaries are walking and talking, cocreating a better future.

What is God prompting you to do? What is He teaching you and showing you? What hope is He providing? What picture of the future is He giving?

The reality of our cocreatorship with God is made plain in Genesis 1, when God blessed Adam and Eve and commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28). With nothing short of five imperatives fired with machine-gun-like repetition, God drives the first command into the heart of first humans. It could not have been a more visionary command.

God expected His human creation to name things, make things, and dream things. And He gave them a pretty big sandbox!

Or consider the faith-filled and future-oriented text of Ephesians 2:10, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Imagine what the Holy Spirit is doing for us through the authorship of Paul. Have you ever told someone you have prepared a surprise for them? Why do you tell them? You want them to feel value, of course. Maybe you want them to feel anticipation. Maybe you want them to feel loved.

That's exactly what Paul wants believers to feel. Is it possible that God has prepared in advance good works for us to find and fulfill? Yes! If anyone is fully awake to this promise of God, each day takes on new visionary meaning.

When it comes to God Dreams, let's think for a moment about the difference between God's point of view and ours. Although God can see all of human history (not to mention eternity past and future), we cannot. You could say our partnership with God comes with a limited point of view. He sees all progress from today forward, all the way to eternity. But we see progress unfolding in time, one day at a time. We see only the present. As physical creatures we are prisoners of time. And at first glance that appears to be a bum deal.

But what if this limitation—being constrained within time—actually creates exciting possibilities?

For starters it's not entirely true that we see only the present. We actually see only the present with our physical eyes. With a different set of eyes—our mind's eye—we can see a myriad of future possibilities. While our eyes are limited to snapshots of today, our mind's eye rolls a film reel into the future.

In fact, our holy aspirations reveal a wonderful part of what it means to be human: we imagine. Dogs and cats don't imagine anything. But we imagine all day long. We can skip time and space at any moment and stay there for as long as we want. When was the last time you drifted to the beach during a boring meeting? Imagination is the key that unlocks the prison of time.

Has your heart ever longed for relationships that didn't yet exist? For brotherhood when enemies flourished? For romance when betrayal was vivid? Have you ever hoped for restoration where you could see only brokenness? For a beautiful home where there's a dilapidated shack? For flowing fresh water when all you could see was desert?

Imagination is the key that unlocks the prison of time.

Imagination makes us powerfully human. It makes us inventors, planners, and lovers. It makes us knowers of the unseen God. Albert Einstein once said that imagination is more important than knowledge. Even the writer of Hebrews connects faith with imagination: without faith—being certain of what we do not see—it is impossible to please God (see Heb. 11:1–6). We could say that faith is being certain of what we can only see with the mind's eye. In the end faith demands

imagination, just as breathing demands air. The idea of hope itself would be a hopeless concept if I couldn't close my eyes and imagine a better future.

Imagination makes us knowers of the unseen God.

So to be in fellowship with God is to be in an inherently visionary relationship. We get the thrilling opportunity to activate what is uniquely and powerfully human: the imagination. Our time-bound experience requires faith and brings into the story of our lives the textures of hope and fear, the surprise of the unknown and the ever-revealing flow of time. It brings the reality of both pain and joy through the time-marked progress of life. The pain reminds us that we were created for something better. The joy keeps us looking forward.

To be in fellowship with God is to be in an inherently visionary relationship.

Could we be describing one of the greatest invitations anyone can receive? Absolutely. It's the opportunity to partner with God! It's an invitation coupled with the corresponding capacity to dream. To dream and then build, to imagine and then initiate, to think and then renovate—this is what you were created to do. God is saving the day and paving the way for you to see and seize a better future.

That future is not distant by the way. It is close enough to be really real, as accessible as the location in which you now read. It is a better future in your time and place and based on your gifts and passion. It emerges from the present place and the now moments.

God is a visionary God. And you, God's servant, have been given the profound ability and responsibility to dream.

Vision Is a Church Thing

It's one thing to explore the fun and imaginative aspects of vision. But the tone changes as soon as you put the words *vision* and *church* in the same sentence. Church leaders generally have different ideas, some good and some bad, when it comes to vision.

You, God's servant, have been given the profound ability and responsibility to dream.

At a recent keynote address for executive pastors, I was asked to speak on "What's after Church Growth, Strategic Planning, and Missional?" The title resonated with many of the pastors attending. And for good reason: we have been overwhelmed with different opinions about the need for vision and planning in the church.

What goes through the minds of most pastors I meet? They affirm that vision is important, but they lack clarity on what it really looks like. Strategic planning is nowhere on their radar. They are as likely to read a blog post making fun of vision statements as they are on getting vision right. They are anxious to get their hands on anything that will bring breakthrough to their thinking and practice.

Why are church leaders generally uncertain about the whole category?

Let's scan the history of "vision" and "planning" over the last few decades.

Strategic planning in corporate America grew out of the application of strategic warfare in World War II. As a new era of management developed in the decades following the war, the practice of strategic planning increased and hit its peak in the 1980s and 90s. Popular expressions of the Church Growth Movement during this time seized any methodologies from the business sector that promised to grow the church, including marketing, management techniques, and, of course, strategic planning.

In the early 1990s *vision* become a hot topic. Business books that put vision on the map include:

- *The Leadership Challenge* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner in 1987
- *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras in 1994
- *Visionary Leadership* by Burt Nanus in 1995

Church leaders followed suit with titles including:

- *The Power of Vision* by George Barna in 1992
- *Developing a Vision for Ministry in the 21st Century* by Aubrey Malphurs in 1999
- *Visioneering* by Andy Stanley in 1999

Even though books were being written on vision, church leaders by and large didn't find much value in the statements that vision retreats and committee meetings produced. More importantly, church leaders during the nineties were looking for successful models, not vision processes. The decade would see the height of the two largest conferences designed to emulate a proven church strategy: The Purpose Driven Church by Saddleback Church and Rick Warren, and The Prevailing Church conferences of Willow Creek Community Church and Bill Hybels.

By the turn of the century, two developments had happened. First, strategic planning was being left behind by the corporate ranks. Second, conferencing around church models was beginning to slow down. Both Saddleback and Willow Creek (among others) began to see dramatic declines in their enrollments.

The resulting "vision" for local church leaders on a practical level mirrored these two issues. Churches either had an outdated strategic plan, with too much information that paralyzed action. (See my chapter in *Church Unique*, "The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning," GodDrea.ms/churchunique.) Or they had photocopied another church's vision without much thought and, therefore, without adequate meaning or application.

Between 2000 and 2015 we witnessed a shift in emphasis in both the business world and the church world, but this time with little overlap. In the corporate sector the long-range planning emphasis steered toward strategic *thinking* and short-term goal setting. As the pace of change increased with technology and communication, leaders began focusing on how to adapt quickly, innovate continually, and execute efficiently.

But in the church space the emphasis steered in other directions, most notably the missional conversation. A new breed of writers, thinkers, and practitioners has moved away from improved church methodology to a reenvisioned church identity. In a nutshell they called the church back to evaluate its very nature from a theological perspective (Christology and ecclesiology). The big deal was no longer creating a church mission statement but the church seeing itself as the creation of "missioning" God. The church of God doesn't have a mission as much as the mission of God has a church.

The church of God doesn't have a mission as much as the mission of God has a church.

Where does that leave church leaders today? The missional conversation continues with mixed reviews. Pastors are writing more and more books on how to do church: *Hybrid Church, Barefoot Church, Total Church, Deep Church, Sticky Church,* and *Slow Church,* to name a few. And the emphasis on short-term goal setting and disciplined execution, found widely in the corporate world, has been largely ignored.

In the end the last twenty-five years of training on vision leaves many pastors in one of the following postures:

- **The skeptics** have endured meeting after meeting, year after year with fruitless retreats and reports that make little difference in the name of vision.
- **The bored** feel the topic of vision is irrelevant and dated.
- **The abused** have abandoned the concept all together, having been overworked and neglected by a "great visionary leader."
- **The busy** are too tired to think about vision while drowning in the priorities of "Sunday's coming" every week.

- **The comfortable** enjoy the peace and well-being of a cruise-control ministry where the status quo is pleasant and perhaps retirement is on the horizon.

But there is one more posture: **the hungry.** This book is for you. You believe God is a visionary, and you know without faith it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:6). You believe a better future exists because you have seen it in your mind's eye and you have felt it in your spirit. God is with you, working in you, wanting to cocreate through you; and you know it.

As we move forward, I invite you to reconsider that simple yet profound list of why clear vision for your church is a gift from God.

Looking forward . . .

- Creates energy on a team.
- Provides hope in difficult times.
- Pushes us to be our best.
- Deepens our dependence on God.
- Reminds us of the payoff of hard work.
- Defines the significance of our lives.
- Leverages the power of focus.
- Gives meaning to the mundane.
- Fuels progress toward our goals.

Which benefits from this list get you most excited?

Remember, vision serves everyone, every day. It's fun and makes us better. And it is always continuing and unfolding.

If you're human, you have a built-in capacity for vision.

If you are still struggling with the concept of vision, this is still the right book for you. Remember that if you're human, you have a built-in capacity for vision. And if you adopt the tools in this book, your competency as a visionary leader will reap a surprisingly fruitful return.

The Double Meaning of *God Dreams*

So far I've spoken of *God Dreams* as a noun, an idea birthed first in the mind of God. I've called it a God Dream.

But *God Dreams* is also a verb. The subtitle to this book contains the words *Finding and Focusing Your Church's Future*. Vision is a human activity wrapped up in the incredible privilege of partnering with a God who dreams.

Now the next step is to ask whether your current vision is generic, and if so, why that's a big problem. That's what the next chapter is about.

GOD DREAMS

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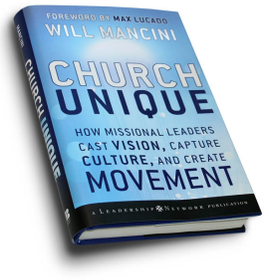

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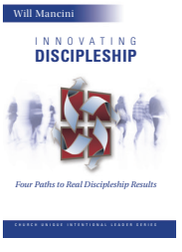
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