

Planning and the Budget

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by **Dan Hotchkiss**

Congregations often plan and budget as though planning were one thing and budgeting another. Bringing the two together calls for a comprehensive calendar for goal-setting and evaluation.

A key event in the sequence is the annual planning retreat. Typically, this event includes the board and senior members of the staff, including lay staff as appropriate. Ideally, the group spends at least a day and a half off-site with a strict no-cell-phone rule. The agenda varies from year to year; the focus is always on discernment and strategy, the two zones of responsibility shared by board and staff. Some special attention to the mission is appropriate every year—but it is rarely a good use of time to tweak the wording of the mission statement that often; once every five years is more than enough, unless something is terribly wrong with the existing statement.

A more necessary work product from the retreat and related activities is the annual vision of ministry, an answer to the question, "In what new and different ways will we transform lives in the next one to three years?" To put it differently, the vision of ministry is the board's short list of priorities. Why a short list? Because when a list of priorities is long, they're not priorities! The vision of ministry is a short list of things the board means to accomplish, no matter what. The fact that something does not make the list does not mean that it won't happen. While creating the vision, the board will bank a number of ideas for the future: pieces of a long-term vision to which the board is not prepared to make an ironclad commitment now. There is no way to do this without sometimes saying no.

The exact process for creating the vision of ministry will change from year to year. In some years, the ministry priorities may be so obvious that the board creates the vision quickly and uses the planning retreat for other purposes. Most of the time the vision of ministry emerges from a yearlong conversation, followed by deeper reflection and exchange during the retreat.

In addition to a vision of ministry, the planning retreat produces "open questions." In discussing the congregation's work and drawing out the hopes and worries of its leaders, retreat participants may find technical challenges surfacing that all but suggest their own solutions. If the boiler is broken, you fix it. Other challenges do not lend themselves to quick or even slow decision making. Perhaps your congregation needs to decide whether to abandon, renovate, or

replace a building that has been the main symbol of its identity for 150 years. Or you may wonder how to serve a neighborhood whose residents are different from the people of your congregation. You may have a nagging sense, as Jonah did, that God is calling you to make radical changes, but the subject is too hot to push it to decision making. The board could make up its mind and announce a solution prematurely, but that seems likely to increase division rather than encourage movement toward a decision. With such challenges, the board can make a major contribution simply by stating the issue clearly as an open question—one it expects the congregation to address sometime in the future, but not now. For now, the next step is sustained, reflective, and inclusive conversation.

After the retreat, everyone has work to do. The staff needs to translate the board's vision of ministry into goals and objectives. In larger churches, the senior staff has goals of its own. Even a simple common slogan, like "We will integrate social outreach into everything we do," can be a good counter to the tendency of busy staff members to draw back into their departments. The staff's goals take the board's vision of ministry and move it to a more practical level. If the vision of ministry says, "We will make room to welcome more people," the staff might say, "After the first of the year, we will add a second session to our children's Sunday school. By then we will be ready to double the number of parking-lot greeters skilled at hospitality to families with children."

Individual staff members set goals next. Beginning each staff member's goal-setting conversation with the board's vision of ministry and goals set by senior staff helps put parochial concerns into the context of the wider mission. It is the job of every ministry team leader to set the stage for goal setting in this way. Then the team proceeds to set goals for itself, and the staff member (in consultation with his or her team, supervisor, and colleagues) sets goals for himself or herself. A practice that promotes a sense of permission and autonomy among teams and their leaders is to presume that their goals will be consistent with the board and senior staff goals, and to deal only with exceptions, instead of sending all goals up the line to be approved.

The budget itself may be assembled by a finance committee and presented to the board for approval. A better process, though, is to put responsibility for creating the budget in the same place as responsibility for achieving the vision of ministry: the staff. At the very least, the head of staff should be required to sign off on the budget, saying to the board, "I believe this budget is a reasonable plan to achieve our vision." Or not. In many congregations the budget process sails right from the committees to the board without the clergy leader (or other head of staff) even having to express an opinion. Under that procedure, it is a stretch to hold the head of staff accountable for much of anything.

With a budget created in this way, the annual fund drive can be based on the vision of ministry as well. Contributors are asked for amounts that, if most of them say "yes," will make the vision possible. The board, clergy, and staff make it clear that the vision is not just something they hope to shoot for; it's a goal they mean to reach. Year after year, people learn that when the congregation asks for gifts, it means what it says. If the members give what is asked, the results promised—the vision of lives changed through ministry—will happen.

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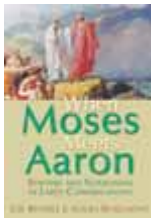
Dan Hotchkiss is a senior consultant at the Alban Institute. "Planning and the Budget" originally appeared in the May-June 2009 issue of *Clergy Journal* (www.logosproductions.com) and is reprinted with permission.

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by **Dan Hotchkiss**

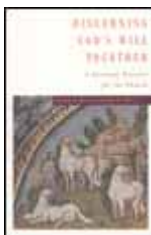
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[When Moses Meets Aaron:
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by **Gil Rendle and Susan Beaumont**

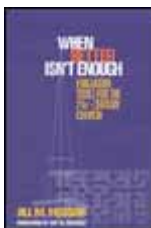
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Alban Weekly, 2009-09-28

Number 270

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