

What to Do When Your Vision Burns Out

Not every church leader will face a vision-crushing blow. But they exist.

They hurt like a heavy-weight sucker punch. You didn't see it coming, and it was hard like an Acme anvil.

Church leaders (especially us pastors) can overreact. We can cry wolf when it's just sheep around. There are cases, however, when one event jars everything loose, when something unforeseen grinds the church to a halt. The vision stops. No one moves.

How do you respond when your church experiences collective blackout? How do you lead when you're shell-shocked with everyone else? When it's impossible to think about a new vision, what are the immediate next steps?

For any leader shepherding followers through a major crisis, the first step is to care for people. When a bomb hits, most of your people will not know what to feel. When people are numb; they're not thinking about the future. No one wants to see a beautiful vision painted when the canvas has vomit on it.

This caring process is a cleaning process. Forget about grand plans and get on your knees and scrub. Sometimes it's all you can do to shepherd people.

Once the air clears, the next step is to describe reality. People don't stay numb forever. They become angry. And confusion only exacerbates anger. It's a mess. Don't deny it. You've got to wake up people to present reality. Be real. Be honest. Explain what happened. Even if confidentiality prevents full disclosure, be clear in what you can describe.

Clarity helps people realize the present can lead to the future. Don't leave people stuck in the mud of ambiguity.

After people understand what happened, most likely they are still not ready for long-term goals. A vision-crushing blow does just that—it obliterates culture, expectations and hopes. Church leaders should create reasonable short-term goals to bridge the gap. Many people will be ready for the next step. Few will be ready for the last mile. As a leader, you must rebuild, if not build a new vision. Following a major crisis, short-term goals help frame a new vision.

Lastly, pastors should shepherd people towards little victories. These small wins help people move again. A vision-crushing blow freezes everyone, but time thaws. It's the leader's responsibility to create a pathway—or process—to get disciple-makers moving together in the right direction. Tangible, visible victories motivate followers to move together. There is something attainable just in front of them. Little victories (as opposed to giant goals) help people realize a new vision is possible.

Sometimes the vision stops. A big, nasty bomb goes off. Everyone is blinded. Everyone freezes.

Your reaction as a leader in the crucial moments (sometimes it's mere hours) following the vision-crushing blow may determine if a new vision will form. But in that moment, it's not time to form this new vision.

You should care for people. Describe what happened. Create short-term goals. And look for little victories to get everyone moving again. {eoa}

Sam Rainer serves as the lead pastor of West Bradenton Baptist Church and co-hosts the podcast. He is the president of Church Answers, the co-founder and co-owner of Rainer Publishing, and the president of Revitalize Network.