

30 Sure-Fire Exercises For Church Strategic Planning

- Jim Baker

Stephen Covey is noted for saying, “Without involvement, there is no commitment.” Mark it down, asterisk it, circle it, and underline it. No involvement, no commitment.

Those are strong words but needed admonishment for those of us who lead in the local church, for broad engagement is one of the things I see as most lacking in church strategic planning.

Today there are many definitions for strategic planning but for the purpose of church based planning the definition I prefer is:

“The process of determining the visionary direction of the church or ministry and then breaking down that overall direction into broad objectives, that are then divided into smaller measurable goals and ultimately to specific tactics.”

And, just as there are many definitions for strategic planning there are a variety of proven approaches to strategic planning. And it can be challenging to discern which approach is right for your church or ministry.

Our purpose here is not to recommend a specific approach. But rather to summarize a variety of strategic planning engagement exercises that may be used by church leadership to stimulate thinking and to identify high impact strategies and tactics for inclusion in the church’s ministry plan.

You may want to choose only those exercises you feel comfortable in facilitating, or you sense will resonate with your leaders and fit your church culture.

More important than the engagement exercises you choose is that they are entered into with an attitude of prayer and seeking the guidance and will of God for your church.

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1. Situational Assessment/Environment Scan Approach

To Determine Current Reality

- May include.
- Gathering member/prospect/attender/leader/staff surveys and focus group perceptions
- Existing systems, processes, culture and technology review
- Staffing model and job description analysis
- Evaluation of current strategies and tactics
- Evaluation of recent past performance against objectives and goals
- Culture and industry trends and shifts
- Demographic studies
- Membership and prospect data base analysis

2. S.W.O.T. Analysis Approach

To Ensure Thorough Analysis

- Strengths - What we do well. How do we maximize these?
- Weaknesses - What we could do better. Which are most glaring?
- Opportunities - Where we are missing it. Which have the potential for the most impact?
- Threats - What could hinder us from achieving our objectives and goals? Which are most threatening?

3. The Mission Statement Approach

To Align Around Mission

- Brainstorm, evaluate and plan around the most significant words of the church's Mission Statement.

4. The Organizational/Ministry Results Approach

To Build on Success

- List the ministries, strategies, tactics, processes, systems, and technology that have contributed most to the success of the church within the past year. How can we build on these successes?

5. Story Telling Approach

To Identify Where God is Working

- Tell the God stories and the life change stories from the past year looking for evidence of where God might be working and inviting us to engage with Him deeper and further.

6. The Resources Approach

To Achieve Synergy of Initiatives

- Brainstorm, evaluate and plan around the financial, capital and human resources available to the church.

7. The Processes, Systems and Technology Approach

To Ensure a Delivery System for Strategies, Tactics and Initiatives

- Conduct a SWOT analysis or simply a Strengths and Weaknesses assessment of each process, system and technology that involves and impacts your church and its ministries looking for areas for strategic improvement

8. The Innovation Approach

To Heighten the Awareness and Importance of Innovation

- List the innovations in your ministry or church over the last 10 years that have been the most defining and impacting
- Each team member share one innovation they have gleaned recently from other churches or organizations.

9. Key Issues/Questions Approach

To Determine Our Response to Challenges

- Identify the key issues and questions the church and/or your ministry face and use those as a basis for strategic planning
- Review the challenges the church and/or your ministry have faced over the years and how we responded for further ideas

10. The Barriers Approach

To Determine Roadblocks to Success

- Why haven't we achieved our goals? What is standing in our way?
- What challenges must we overcome to achieve our objectives and goals?

11. Critical Success Factors Approach

To Determine Keys to Success

- Identify the few key conditions that must be met to achieve your objectives and goals and let those serve as a guide for determining strategies to be developed.

12. The Distinctives Approach

Capitalizing on our Uniqueness

- List the characteristics, values and attributes that make the church or ministry unique from thousands of other churches or ministries and determine how we might better maximize them.

13. Innovative Church Scan Approach

To Not Re-invent the Wheel

- What are the emerging characteristics, methods, strategies and tactics we see in other innovative churches? How can these be adapted (not adopted) for our purposes?
- What new paradigms are we seeing in the church and Kingdom work? Which do we need to begin communicating and incorporating into our planning?

14. Internal and External Environment Scan Approach

To Capture Trends

- What external trends, societal issues (family, technology, political, aging, crime, worldviews, etc.) and local cultural dynamics (materialism, economy, mobility, etc.) are most impacting our people and those we are trying to reach? How should these impact our strategies and tactics?
- External culture watch – have staff bring newspaper and periodical articles, blogs, web pages, etc. that they see as indicative of the culture, culture shaping or signals a future trend.
- Conduct a SWOT analysis of the church, ministry or staff culture.

15. The Staffing/ Volunteer Model Approach

Strategy Determines Structure

- If we could add one key staff and/or volunteer position that would have the most strategic impact what would that position and person look like?
- What does our ministry/department staffing and volunteer model need to look like over the next 5 years to accommodate strategic growth?
- How might we restructure our current team to pursue new strategic initiatives?

16. The Stakeholder Approach

To Ensure We Hear From Those We Serve

- What skills and gifts are we currently lacking? Who in the church can be trained to do what we need them to do?
- Conduct a talent and vocation survey of the congregation or ministry constituency to see if there are capabilities we have yet to identify
- Conduct Member/prospect/attender/leader surveys and focus groups to glean ideas

17. The Dialectic Approach

Using the Pendulum Theory to Predict the Future

- As a process for initiating innovative rather than just adaptive change examine past and current ministry strategies and see if you can identify their thesis, antithesis, and synthesis moments (traditional worship/contemporary worship/blended worship; Sunday School Classes/Small Groups/Sunday School Classes that also have Small Groups) and discuss what the next antithesis and synthesis or hybrids of your current strategies might look.

18. The Great Person Approach

To Identify the Core Strands of Church DNA

- List the most impactful past and present staff and lay leaders of the church and/or ministry and identify what energized them, what they prayed for, the attributes, passions and gifts that made them difference makers. What strategies and tactics can we develop to build on that DNA?

19. The Broad Objectives Approach

To Align Around Church Objectives

- Determine 5-7 broad multi-year objectives for the church
- Brainstorm potential goals for each objective
- Brainstorm potential strategies and tactics for achieving the goals

20. Strategic Plumb Lines Approach

To Determine That Which is Foundational

- Compile an exhaustive list of everything that is currently true about the church
- Look for patterns, themes, and categories
- Determine which three or four of these are so fundamental they should be considered foundational and therefore be used to inform all other decisions, strategies and tactics

21. Start-Stop-Continue Approach

To Identify Margin for New Initiatives

- Start - What new strategies and tactics might we initiate that will move the needle on our objectives and goals?
- Stop - What could we stop doing that would provide the margin for the initiatives we want to start? What current strategies and tactics are our least effective in moving the needle?
- Continue - What current strategies and tactics could be maximized more effectively and efficiently to move the needle further?

22. The 50% Approach

To Determine What is Core and Priority

- If I had only time to implement half of my current strategies and tactics which would I choose?
- If I only had half of my current budget which strategies and tactics would I eliminate?
- If I only had half of my current volunteers which strategies and tactics would I pursue?
- How do I increase the impact of the strategies and tactics this exercise identified as priorities?

23. The Pruning Approach

To Distinguish Good from Great

- Examine your ministries and identify those programs and initiatives that are dying or are already in fact dead but we continue to fund.
- Identify those programs and initiatives that are still producing but not to the degree they did in the past as potential candidates for pruning.

24. The Wants and Needs Gap Analysis Approach

To Determine Needs Based Initiatives

- Through surveys and focus groups determine the wants and needs of various target groups within the church, a ministry or the community.
- Determine which wants and needs have the largest gap when compared with current strategies and tactics as opportunities for strategic focus.

25. The Motivation-Dissatisfaction Analysis Approach

To Determine Dissatisfaction Based Initiatives

- Through surveys and focus groups determine the areas of dissatisfaction of various target groups within a ministry.
- Determine which areas of dissatisfaction are most intense or pervasive as potential areas for ministries people might respond to the most.

26. The Scorecard Approach

To Monitor Progress

- List the factors that are indicative of ministry success.
- Determine various ways to measure those factors.
- List SMART (Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely) goals for each measurement
- Brainstorm strategies that will help you reach those SMART goal measurements

27. The Vision Approach

To Start with the End in Mind

- Revisit the church's or ministry's vision and identify the steps and strategies required to fulfill that vision.

28. The Values Approach

To Shape Culture

- List the church's or ministry's values and determine which are aspirational and determine strategies that might make them more actual and shared.
- List bad and incongruent values and determine strategies that might make them good and congruent.

29. The Outside Voice Approach

Borrowed Perspective

- Bring in an outside facilitator to facilitate the planning process.
- Bring in an outside subject matter specialist to consult and lead a discussion around a strategic initiative.
- Consider that outside facilitators and specialists may come from sources such as church staff, staff from other churches, lay leaders from within the church or paid consultants.

30. The Paradox Approach

To Get Outside Your Box

- Brainstorm strategies and tactics that are more “being” than “doing” oriented
- Brainstorm approaches to evangelism that are Incarnational rather than Attractional
- Brainstorm initiatives that speak to the heart rather than the head

About Sacred Structures and Jim Baker



For the past 10 years Jim has served as Executive Pastor at Brentwood Baptist Church outside Nashville, Tennessee serving alongside Senior Pastor Mike Glenn to lead one of the largest and fastest growing churches in the nation.

During Jim's tenure Brentwood Baptist Church has doubled and tripled every significant metric of church growth and health and has grown from a staff of 14 ministers to over 50 with a support staff of over 100. Jim is also a certified Model-netics Instructor, a nationally recognized training system of organizational and management concepts and principles.

In his spare time Jim exercises his passion for both creativity and structure through his hobby of reclaiming vintage bibles, hand made pieces and broken and cast away items and repurposing them into crosses and representations of biblical metaphors. Jim sees these "sacred structures" as representative of how Christ "makes all things new" through God's Word and his Spirit and can repurpose our mistakes and our lives for his purposes.

Information on Jim's coaching, consulting, training and speaking services as well as purchase of his art structures is available on his website, SacredStructures.org.