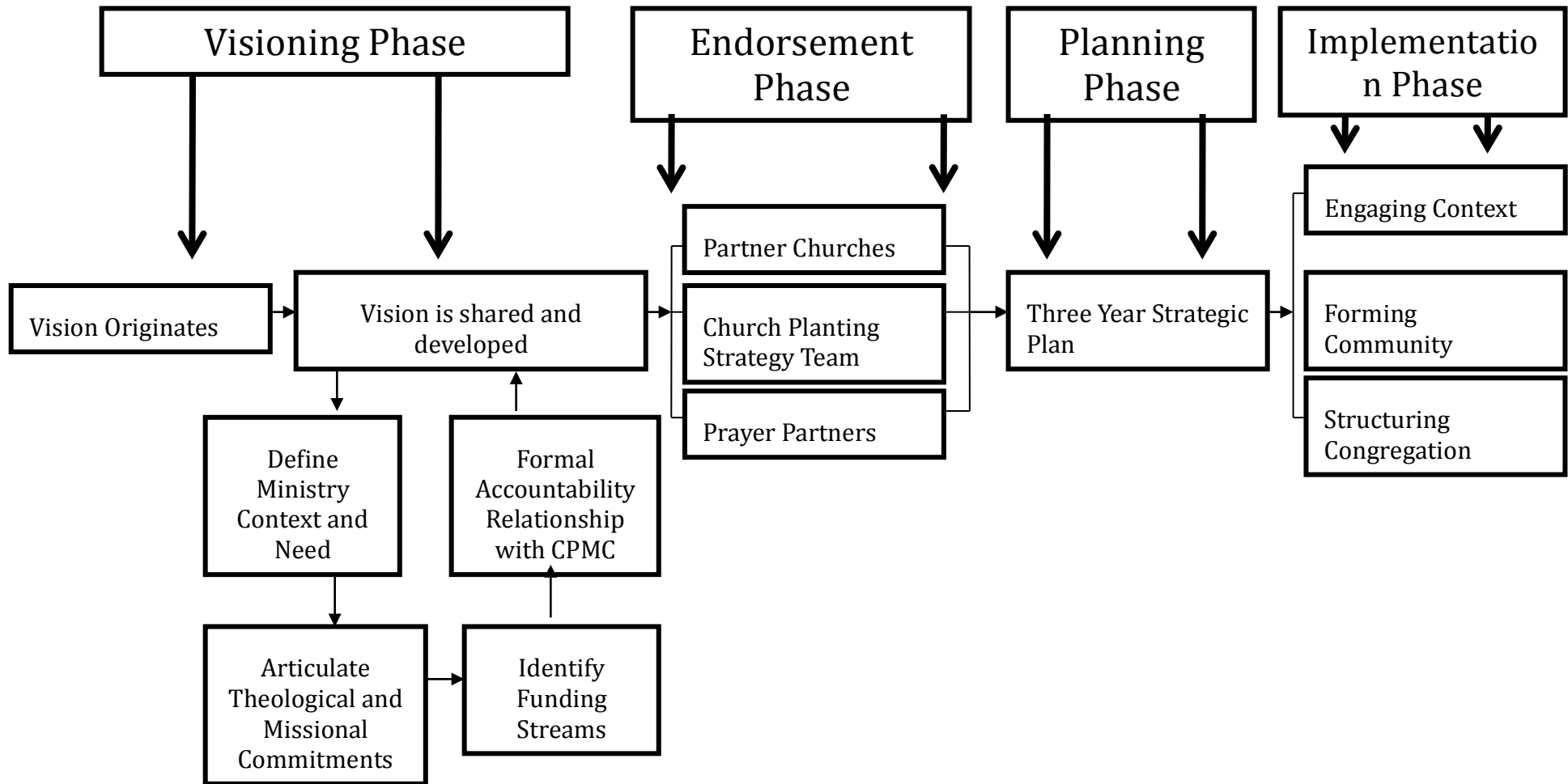


# Strategic Vision Development



## **Visioning Phase:**

We believe that God honors good planning. The visioning phase might be likened to old patterns of farming where farmers make multiple passes through a field to prepare the ground before any seeds are planted. The farmer plows, discs, then harrows the soil – sometimes more than once – and only when the soil has been prepared does the planting begin. We do not believe in “no-till” approaches to church planting.

**The vision emerges:** The vision for a new church may originate in a number of places and in a number of ways. The origin of vision is one of the messiest and least predictable, and least apt to be standardized aspects of the church planting strategy. It may emerge from an individual who has a heart for church planting, it may emerge from a congregation that wants to expand the geographic or reach of their witness, it may emerge among a number of individuals within a given region, or it may emerge at a conference or regional level in response to major shifts in the demographics of a given context.

As a vision for a new Christian community emerges, we do not rush to judge the credibility of the vision. The vision simply is. As the vision develops, we begin to test whether adequate alignment emerges between those who hold the vision and the priorities and purposes of Central Plains Mennonite Conference. The vision development stage is itself an exercise in determining whether the vision has integrity to move forward or not. In other words, if those who hold the vision cannot find their way through these initial steps of developing the vision, it is safe to question whether the vision holders have the resources, skills, and gifts necessary to succeed in their task. Moving through these steps should provide an adequate sense to conference leaders if they should become an advocate and guide in the further implementation of the vision.

### *Steps in the vision development process:*

This is the most critical stage of any church planting endeavor, and it is often the most overlooked and underdeveloped. If the foundations are not laid carefully, whatever is built on that foundation will not be stable. In our experience, prospective church planters need to invest significantly more energy into this phase than we have observed in the past. The four stages in this process include articulating theological and missional commitments, describing the ministry context and need, identifying funding streams that will adequately support the vision, and articulating a covenant of relationship with the area conference.

- **Theological and missional commitments:**  
In this step, prospective church planters draft a clear and concise description of the theology and values that they expect the new church to embody. This will include a discussion of foundational commitments to the Anabaptist tradition that sees Jesus as the fullest revelation of God and that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are considered normative for the Christian life. This statement should include a description of how the emerging community will use the Bible in discerning common life commitments. There should be a discussion of the church planters’ commitments to the articles of the *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995). In terms of values, the church planters will describe areas of special emphasis that will characterize their witness to the way of Jesus for this church. Such things will include special emphases in discipleship, evangelism, peace, justice, and spirituality.

By missional commitments, we expect to see a self-conscious awareness that while the vision for this church emerges in the hearts of people, the *mission of this congregation originates in*

*the life and character God.* Emerging missional congregations will seek to become *incarnational* signs of the reign of God breaking into the world. That is, church planters will seek to nurture a community of people into existence that not only proclaims good news, but is good news within, and to, the context of mission. Emerging missional congregations will declare their preparedness to be present to the places where sin, brokenness, and alienation wait in hope for redemption.

- Defining the Context of Mission and Need

In this step, prospective church planters will report their understanding of the context of mission by undertaking a careful study of the demographics (racial/ethnic, employment issues, class dynamics, education access and quality, religious culture, etc.) of the community. This study will answer such questions as, Is the community already over-churched? Is there need in the community that isn't being met by existing congregations? What are the particular places in this community that need to be reconciled to God? Building on the missional commitments described above, this step has prospective church planters describing where they imagine God is at work in this context and how this emerging congregation might be present in the context in full participation with where reconciliation and redemption are needed.

- Identifying funding Streams

It is naïve to think that churches can be planted without money. Having done the prior two steps, prospective church planters are encouraged to think carefully about what level of funding will be necessary to carry out the ministry in this context and do it well. Too often, church planters make the mistake of failing to identify where adequate funding will come from and decide to venture forth doing whatever they can with whatever money they have or find. This is akin to making bricks without straw. It has proven in our experience to be a sure recipe for burnout. It would be better to delay the launch of a new church in order to spend adequate time raising money or identifying ongoing funding sources than to launch a new congregation and realize later that the leaders have neither the money nor the energy to sustain what was begun. Jesus told us this: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28) In our experience, when the foundational work in the prior two steps is done with integrity, prospective funding partners will be more easily identified.

- Formalize Accountability Relationships with the Conference

Only when the prospective church planters have completed the prior three steps (with the help of conference advisors), will the church planters and the conference formally partner in this ministry. At this point the prospective church planters will be "endorsed" by conference leaders and publicly "adopted" into the ministry of supporting congregations and the conference. The final step in the vision development phase is to articulate in writing a covenantal relationship that outlines the needs and gifts of the emerging congregation *and* the partnering congregations and the commitments that each will make to the other (see the example of one such covenant below). The commitments of church planters will include a willingness to be held accountable for the theological commitments they have articulated, a means of accounting for their progress in fulfilling their plan, opportunities for existing congregation to participate in the worship and community life of the emerging congregation, a

plan for the mutual learning among all partners, and a mechanism to ensure that money is handled with appropriate accountability.

### **Endorsement Phase**

It feels like quite a journey just to get to the endorsement phase, hasn't it? Remember, God honors good planning! The endorsement phase, by comparison to the vision development phase, is relatively simple. Conference, working with prospective church planters now establishes a network of supporting relationships with regular, frequent communication with three sets of people: 1) existing congregations who desire to partner in this new ministry; 2) the conference church planting strategy team who guides, equips, and oversees emerging congregations; and 3) a group of people specifically committed to fervent prayer for the church planters and their emerging congregation.

### **Planning Phase**

The planning phase is the process of developing a realistic, yet ambitious plan that grows organically out of the theological and contextual work in the vision development phase. The plan will encompass the strategies to be carried out in the first two, and preferably three, years. These strategies will be structured around three areas that are key to the life and witness of any congregation: 1) engaging the context paying attention to 1<sup>st</sup> places (immediate neighbors, hospitality, exchange of good), 2<sup>nd</sup> places (work, school where the exchange is economic and information, and 3<sup>rd</sup> places ("the great, good place," where people gather and power is equalized, relationships are authentic. guards come down. non-competitive); 2) forming community; and 3) Structuring the congregation a) leadership development, b) how the congregation will be a center for theological education; and c) how the life of the congregation will be not only intercessory but vocational, that is, what is God calling us to do and to be?

### **Implementation Phase**

While it may feel like this process is overwhelming and requires a lot of time at the front end, ideally, the emerging congregation will not begin meeting for public worship until the first three phases have been thoroughly developed. As the church moves from the planning phase to the implementation phase, the new church begins to organize. It is possible, and maybe even likely, that the first public worship event happens only after the community begins to organize around leadership development and discipleship/vocational prayer ministries begin. The important thing to monitor in this phase is that the church planters are working the well-crafted plan they have conceived through careful discernment and bathed in the prayer support of others.

Okay, let's come clean. We recognize that the Holy Spirit does not always work in straight lines, neat rows and columns. The point of this process is not to put church planting – or the Spirit, for that matter - into a straightjacket. But, rest assured, the problem in church planting is not usually with the neatness of the rows and columns! The problem is that too often no one is keeping track of forward movement as a new church is born through a journey that is often characterized by fits and starts, blind curves, and bottleneck passageways. God honors good planning. It is our hope that this developing strategic frame will help bring clarity to the process for those who hold the emerging vision as well as those who partner in the support and development of new communities of faith.