



Vision4Life
Transforming the church

taking the next step

Reflecting on three conversations



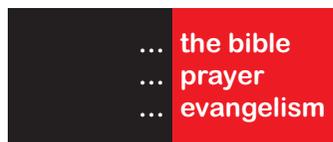
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conversations about



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Introduction

The vision

This fourth session of the series is designed to give you time to reflect on the three conversations you will have had by now. *Vision4Life* follows on from *Catch the Vision* and was introduced in 2007 at General Assembly. It grew from conversations between people from across the denomination, who got inspired by exploring the Bible and prayer, and sharing their faith stories.

Churches planning local initiatives such as Hope '08 are encouraged to try including elements of *Vision4Life* within these events, and not to see it as being in competition with them.

What follows is a suggested framework for a conversation about the next step for your congregation in terms of *Vision4Life*. Now you have talked about your relationship with the Bible, prayer and telling your faith stories what is the next step? The four sections – Remember, Reflect, Respond and Refresh – are followed by worship suggestions for a *Vision4Life* Sunday.

The material in this booklet is for use by the person leading the session – probably a minister or Elder. If you can do this collaboratively then so much the better.

Please visit the website www.vision4life.org.uk for other *Vision4Life* materials including worship.

How to use the material

The most important role for leaders is to give everyone the best chance to talk openly and honestly about taking the next step. Set ground

rules at the start – about listening to each other, respecting each other's views, encouraging everyone to speak and not letting anyone dominate.

Here are some suggestions for using the material. Please do whatever suits your setting:

- a 20-30 minute discussion within a Church Meeting with a wider agenda
- a special meeting, possibly after Sunday morning worship
- a conversational event with shared food

Section one: remember

Where have we got to so far?

Spend a few minutes identifying where people believe they are now with this process. If you made any notes or record of earlier discussions you may refer to them. Give space for people to recall each of the three conversations. Let anyone who was not there for any or some of these hear a bit of what they missed.

Section two: reflect

Where do we want to get to?

Ask people where they would like to be in four years' time in relation to the Bible, prayer and sharing our faith stories. Invite people to dream a bit and be imaginative and hopeful. Encourage people to think of some hopes that might be **specific, measurable, realistic and timed (smart)**.

Some people might want to know their Bible well, and that's a great hope. It might be more realistic, though, if people aim to be more at ease with the Bible. Then they need not feel unsettled or disturbed by their ignorance of it.



While it might be a great thing to have a prayer life with a more regular pattern, or to have more time for prayer, it would also be good to find ways of praying which help us to live more faithfully each day. We need not expect everyone to say a Daily Office or pray in tongues, but we can each take a step to deepen our prayer life.

We may hope our churches will be filled with new people, but it might be wiser to aim for a congregation that is more at ease with speaking about faith and sharing faith stories – we can leave the rest to the Holy Spirit.

When you have dreamed together about the Bible, prayer and evangelism, write down some clear, measurable aims for each of these.

Section three: respond **What would help us now?**

Now ask this question: **Will it help if, over each of the next three years, this church gives time to looking at the resources of the faith – the Bible, prayer and evangelism?**

If the answer to that question is 'yes' then you may be ready to make a commitment to *Vision4Life*. If the answer is 'no' then you need to have another discussion about what would help instead.

The United Reformed Church will produce over the next three years a whole variety of materials for you to choose from, material that will help your congregation to engage with the primary sources and resources of the Christian faith – with the Bible, with prayer and with the story of the Gospel.



- We all hope for a Church more at ease with the Bible and reading it more.
- We all hope that Christ's people will discover a more satisfying and enriching prayer life.
- We all hope to belong to a Church in which we are more confident about telling our faith stories and about telling the Gospel story.
- We all hope our cities, suburbs and villages may be transformed by the Gospel.

These are not sophisticated hopes or new-fangled ideas. These are simply the core of the Christian life and the resources for life which God offers to all of us. Together we can find them again, and find them renewed. Are you ready to sign up for *Vision4Life*?

Section four: refresh

Are we ready for the next step?

Ask people: **are we ready to start becoming a *Vision4Life* congregation?** If you are then you can start planning the next three years. You do not need to decide everything now. The Bible year starts in Advent 2008 and there will be a choice of materials to use, as well as recommended resources.

You can adapt material to suit your needs, produce your own materials, and ask the *Vision4Life* steering group for help finding what you want. Be encouraged that others are on this journey too.

It would be good if congregations make a commitment to this within worship on a Sunday. Find the right date for you and plan a *Vision4Life* Sunday. On that day you may then commit yourselves before God to what you have agreed in Church Meeting, and pray for God's blessing on the next three years. Resources and suggestions for that service follow here.





Life

Worship suggestions for a Vision4Life Sunday

Please note that these are suggestions to help you in planning a Vision4Life Sunday. They are not intended to be prescriptive. Your worship will need to be planned locally and should be an authentic expression of your local congregation's life and faith. Please choose hymns and songs to suit local needs.

Bible readings:

- Isaiah 55:1-3
God gives us freely all that we need for authentic life
- Philippians 4:5b-7
Don't be anxious, for God is with us and gives us peace
- Matthew 6:7-13
Learn the simple lessons of prayer for each day

Sermon notes:

The Christian life has frequently been pictured as a journey or a pilgrimage. Sometimes the pilgrims have been found among the apostles, at other times the Celtic saints, Augustine's little band bringing the gospel to England, or Bunyan's character Christian in 'Pilgrim's Progress' who was trying to reach the Celestial City. All these pilgrims have found plenty of dragons that needed slaying along the way, and the odds against the Church have sometimes seemed enormous.

Spend some time thinking of the dragons and threats that face us in our Christian pilgrimage now. You might consider (amongst others) consumerism, poverty, racism, demography, secularism, or other issues specific to your context.

However fierce the foes or daunting the odds, another reality challenges the dragons, for God is with the people of God and is supplying their needs. These three readings explore that reality:

- Isaiah 55:1-3

In this passage the prophet hears God challenge the assumptions of his people that they are tied to the ways of living dictated by the socio-economic system in which they live. Using the simplest of pictures – thirst, hunger, money, wine, milk, bread, the basic realities of living – Isaiah tells us that in God's economy there **is** such a thing as a free lunch! It really is 'on the house'. And he tells the people not to waste their hard earned money on what does not satisfy, but to come to God's free lunch. Isaiah might have been echoing the story of the manna – God's free gift of food to his people with just enough for each day's journey (Exodus 16), and his words remind us that God's grace meets us when things seem impossible. The God of manna works his will through a child born to Abraham's wife Sarah in her old age and Mary the mother of Jesus in her adolescence. Isaiah wrote these words to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, oppressed by an alien culture, a tiny minority amongst a population who lived by other values and who worshipped another god. Draw out the similarities between their predicament and ours.

- Philippians 4:5b-7

The Lord is near! This passage is often used as an Advent epistle reading. Paul probably thought that the Second Coming was imminent, but he might also have meant to say that God is close to us, near at hand, interested and involved in the lives, loves and difficulties of his people. Paul



offers Christians a tool for their journey – prayer. Christians grow in faith and understanding through exercising the Christian spiritual disciplines. Prayer is a central discipline. It is one of the principal channels that sustains our relationship with God. An Anglican bishop was once asked when he prayed and he replied, ‘Always and never’. It was a wonderful answer. Although specific times of prayer are important, the goal of prayer is to live our lives **as if** we are aware of God each moment, to let that relationship determine the way we each live our lives. If we are a prayerful pilgrim people, living with God in each day, God will grant us the gift of his peace, his **shalom**, his blessing.



- Matthew 6:7-13

We sometimes become obsessed with knowing what the end of our journey will be. Will our congregation have doubled in ten years? Will our church still be here in ten years? Such worries are only natural, but Jesus gave his people a prayer which reminds them of what is really important:

- We need to focus our attention on God, God’s kingdom, God’s will, that the earth may be as God wishes it to be (‘as it is in heaven’).
- God will give us what we need – not bread for a lifetime but bread for ‘to-day’ or (as some ancient manuscripts suggest) ‘to-morrow’. In other words, God is now, life is now. Spend too much time worrying about the future and you’ll miss the blessing, which is now, for God is present with us now. What matters is not the end, but the journey, faithfulness not calculations of worldly success.

- And then we need to live as forgiven people, letting the energy of God's forgiveness loose in our relationships, for God has forgiven us.

These three readings point to a radically different, counter-cultural way of living. If we can commit ourselves to the journey, to living the Christian disciplines, to trusting God to give bread enough for the day, the good news is that God will walk with us, for God is near, longing to bless us with peace and embrace the world with his **shalom**.

Words of Commitment:

We believe that God calls us into life,
meets us in Jesus Christ
and blesses us with the Holy Spirit.

God has given us a vision
for life restored and transformed,
in church and community,
through prayer and action.

We open ourselves to receive the gifts of God;
to read the Bible, to offer prayer,
to share the story of our faith.

We commit ourselves to Vision4Life
and await in hope a renewal of faith,
for God is with us.

Amen.



Hearing back from you...

We hope that our ideas have helped you to have a useful discussion and that your church is considering engaging with the next three years of *Vision4Life*.

A lot of *Vision4Life* materials, including downloadable versions of the words and images in this booklet, will be on the website www.vision4life.org.uk as well as worship ideas. Please use the website if you can and let us know if having printed materials as well is really important to you.

Comments, stories and suggestions on our website:

www.vision4life.org.uk

or send an email to:

admin@vision4life.org.uk

or write to us at:

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Many thanks from the *Vision4Life* steering group

