

A Vision For 2025

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[0:00] Well, tonight I'd like us to turn back to John chapter 15, and I'd like to read again the words of verse 5, where Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. Now, I want to say at the very start that tonight's sermon is going to be a little bit different from usual. Our title is A Vision for 2025, and I want us to take the opportunity for us to think about that. It's the start of January, I was in Shabbos last week, so this is our first Sunday evening together as we go into this new year, and it's a wonderful opportunity for us to think about what we hope for, what we long for, what we're going to pray for in the next year of our lives together. So it's a great opportunity to do that, although it's just a bit different from what we would normally focus on in terms of maybe a study or whatever. As elders, we met in December, and we were thinking and talking about the coming year, and we agreed that for the coming year, we would have a focal point for our prayers and for our vision.

And that focal point is for 2025 to be a year in which we will grow by 25%. And that's what we have there on the screen, 20-25%. And I think you're going to hear me say that a lot over the coming months, because I want us to think and pray and aim for this together over the coming year. Now, as I share this with you tonight, I am excited and reluctant. I'm reluctant for two reasons.

First, because when you say anything like this, and when I start talking about this in church, it can make it sound like all we care about is numbers, it's about numbers, we want to be bigger, and that can be very unhealthy in lots of ways. And the second reason why I'm reluctant is that it can sound as though, you know, oh, well, if we just sort of pick a number and aim for it, then we'll get there as though it's got nothing to do with God at all. And sometimes people are very hesitant to speak or think in terms of numbers like this, because it sounds like something that a business would do, rather than something that a church would do. So I do have these hesitations when I speak like that.

But there's two things that we've got to recognize as we think about all of this. The first is that we cannot escape the fact that numbers matter. Now, numbers don't make churches successful. You can have massive churches that are unhealthy, and you can have a tiny church that's doing a wonderful work and honoring Jesus. And we should never, ever think that if more people come to our church, that means that God likes us more. That is absolutely not true. Numbers don't define success in a church. But numbers make churches close.

[3:15] And that's a hard truth that we cannot escape from. There are churches, there are many churches closing in Scotland. There are some free churches that are in danger of closing. It's all because of numbers.

And so whilst at one level, we don't want to care too much about numbers, at the same time, we definitely care about the fact as to whether or not there's a church here in Carloway bringing the gospel to the generations that are going to come up after us. That means that we have to care about numbers. But caring about numbers does not mean that we have abandoned our dependence on God or our desire to be faithful to Him. In fact, the opposite is true. In having a sense of vision, and in talking about something like this, whatever your vision might be, whether the vision is to renovate the building, or whether it's to start a new ministry, or whether it's to grow by however many percentage points that you want to grow to, our vision and our goals and our hopes and our dreams always and forever only stand on the truth of John 15 5. Without Jesus, we can do nothing.

But the key point is that we are not without Him. And that's the second thing that we've got to recognize. So at the one level, we can't escape the fact that numbers matter. The second thing we've got to remember and got to realize that Jesus is with us. And that means that we can do something.

And that's why I am also very, very excited to talk about this together tonight. We want 2025 to be a year when we grow by 25%. And I want us to start by noticing and by really emphasizing that that vision reflects biblical truth because the New Testament expects growth. The New Testament expects growth in the life of the church. So John 15, yes, it talks about the fact that without Him, we can do nothing. It also talks about the fact that we are going to bear fruit as Christians.

That's the expectation. And the same thing gets emphasized again and again and again. All of this idea of fruitfulness. And fruitfulness emphasizes both health in terms of a tree bearing fruit is healthy, but also fruit also means multiplying because inside the fruit is the seed that falls on the ground and more trees grow and everything gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Fruitfulness is all about growth. That's what the New Testament expects. John 15 makes that absolutely clear. The parable of the sower makes it clear. The seed that falls on good soil is to grow and it yields 30 fold, 60 fold, and a hundred fold. The same is emphasized by Paul who takes up the same language in Colossians chapter 1.

[6 : 19] He talks about the gospel which has come to you as indeed in the whole world. It is bearing fruit and increasing as it does so among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

Same emphasis comes from Jesus' teaching in the parables. There's the parable of the mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It's the smallest of all seeds, but when it had grown, it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make a nest in its branches.

And when Jesus called the disciples, I won't read all of this, but when Jesus called the disciples in Luke 5, it's so important to recognize that he came to them. They'd been fishing all night. They had caught nothing and he said to them, go back out. And so they went back out and they put their nets down again and it was full of fish so that the boat was nearly sinking. And then when they came back in, he said, follow me. And from now on, you're going to be catching men. Why did he send them back out to get loads of fish only to abandon their careers as fishermen? It was to show them that that's the kind of catch they're going to have, that many people are going to come in and that fruitfulness and growth and harvest is to be expected. One final example. It's in 2 Corinthians 9, 6 to 15. I'm not going to read the whole passage. It's a long passage. It's all talking about being generous in terms of finances and giving of resources. But the point I simply want to highlight is the principle at the very start that whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, but whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully.

And it's a great reminder that the New Testament's expectation is that we would reap bountifully. Looking ahead to the coming year, it is biblical to expect growth. It's biblical to expect growth.

[8 : 24] When it comes to thinking about the church and thinking about what the church is, it's very easy to think of the church as an institute. And in many ways, the church is an institute. And, you know, because if you think about it, it's like an organization, it's a society, it has structures, it has boundaries, and there's a lot in the church that kind of stands like an institute. And that is true. The church is an institute. But many theologians that have recognized that the church shouldn't just be seen as an institute, it should also be seen as an organism.

The church is institutional and organic. And it's crucial to recognize that. And the organic aspect is crucial. The church is a living body. And the key point is this. An institution can stand still.

An organism never stands still. If you think of the castle grounds, the castle, Lewis Castle, is an... But the castle grounds there, stable, strong, clear.

But the castle grounds is an organism that never stands still. It's always either growing and bearing fruit or shrinking and withering. And the church is both of these things. But in terms of being an organism, it's reminding us that the church is never standing still. It should always be growing, always bearing fruit. And that raises some really important questions for us as a denomination in the free church. And for the church in Scotland as a whole, it raises questions for us as a congregation.

And it raises questions for us as individual disciples. And it's important that we ask them, are we increasing or decreasing? And that's just a very, very basic level. Are we growing or are we shrinking? Are our trends upwards or downwards? So if we think about where we are in terms of numbers in our church, is the graph going up or is the graph going down? Are we maturing or drifting?

[10 : 45] And that's reminding us that growth is never just numerical. It's never just about numbers. It's also about maturity. And that's the same in a plant. You look at a garden. Are there more plants in the garden? Yes or no?

And are the plants in the garden getting stronger and healthier? Are they maturing or are we drifting? Is our faith thriving as we grow and learn or is it kind of stumbling? Are we drifting in our faith?

Are we stronger or weaker? So are our resources, our energies, our ministries getting stronger or are they slowly running out of steam? Are we deepening or hardening? Now what I mean by that is that our love for God and for one another? Is that deepening? Are we loving God more? Are we loving one another more and more and more? Or are the bruises and frustrations and disappointments of life hardening us?

And are we overflowing or draining? So I want you to imagine that the church is a bath and the church bath should be overflowing. Overflowing with love and joy and delight that spills out all over our lives and blesses other people. Not one that is being drained by tension, negativity, strife, envy, envy, exhaustion. We want our church bath to be overflowing, not draining as the plug leaks and everything slips out. As we go into each year of our lives as Christians and as a congregation together, we want to be increasing, maturing, getting stronger, deepening in our love and overflowing to others. In 2025, our vision is to grow by 25%. Now, for the rest of our time, I just want to unpack that a wee bit more. First of all, I want to say that that number, that figure 25% is important and not that important. So it's important, but it's not that important. It's important because although it's bold, it is achievable. So we're not aiming for something, you know, that only would be possible by a monumental miracle. We are recognizing something that really can happen and that really is something that we can aim for. And it's so important that in our sense of vision as a church and as individual Christians, it's so often that we are not switching between 0% and 100%. And I think it's often we can do that. Sometimes I'm a bit anxious that people only have two categories in terms of the life of the church. There's a day of small things when nothing happens and there's revival when everything happens. And it seems to be that many people are kind of like one or the other. And, you know, that means that people are either mega depressed or mega excited. So they're looking at the church just now and they're thinking, well, nothing's happening and it's this and it's just all kind of negative. Or it's like potentially a time of revival and it's amazing. Now, these two are opposites at one level because revival is an incredible experience when God does amazing things in the life of a church and draws many people to faith. And a day of small things is the opposite. It's super discouraging, hard, and not much happening. But although these things are opposite, they've both got something in common. Neither of them are the biblical norm for the church. Neither of them are what the Bible expects to be the normal pattern for the church because the normal biblical pattern is focused on sowing and reaping. And sowing and reaping isn't a 0% or 100% thing. Instead, sowing and reaping is a steady work where we spread the gospel, where we tell people about Jesus and where he brings people in and builds his church. And 25% is, I think I'm contradicting myself, but it's 25% is 100% doable as we seek to do what God wants us to do, as we are guided and helped by him. We can sow for this kind of growth. And with God's help, it'll come. So the number's important, and it's good to think about it, but it's also not that important. Because if we don't achieve it, but grow. So if there's 20% more people or 15% more people or 10% or whatever, that's amazing, and we will rejoice in that. And if also after six months we're here in June and everything has grown by 25%, we're not going to say, well, Lord, please stop.

Of course we're not. We'll keep on praying for more and more growth. So the number's helpful and important, but it's not that important. It's just, it's the direction that it moves us in that matters more than anything. So the number is important, but not that important. Second thing I want to say is that in talking about this, we are talking about more than just getting people in the door and getting people into these empty seats. There are more empty seats than full seats here tonight.

[16 : 07] We want that to change. Absolutely. But this is about more than just filling up the seats. Growth in a church, growth as Christians is about more than that. And over the coming year, I want us to focus on four key areas, which are attendance, yes, numbers, but also spiritual disciplines, hospitality, and helping those who are in need. Now, let me just unpack these a little bit more. So attendance is obvious, but I mean attendance at all of our services.

We want to grow on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, midweek, Thursday evening, and our monthly prayer meeting on Zoom on the first Tuesday of every month. So Sunday morning on a

really, really good Sunday, we have 65, about 65 people will come to church. We want that to be 80 to 85 people.

And there's room for that. We bought enough seats for that. And there's enough people in our community for that to happen. It would be amazing to see that. We want to see us go from 65 on a really good Sunday morning to 80 to 85 on a really good Sunday morning. That would be so, so good. And it's so doable. Sunday evening, again, with a wee bit lower tonight, January is always, you take a hit in terms of numbers. Often we can hit 40 on a good Sunday evening. We want to hit 50. We want to see more people coming. And it would be wonderful to see that. And I do want to take a teeny moment just now to appeal to those who join us online. And there may be some folk who live in the community who join us online, who don't come to church that often. We love that you join us online, but we would love to see you here with us, even if you were able to come to one of the services. It would be so, so good if you were able to join us. So please, please think about that. And if you are able to come, and if you need help with lifts or anything, please tell us. We'll gladly, gladly help you with that. But we'd love to see that grow. Midweek, let me talk about Thursdays. Average for a Thursday is about 16, sometimes less, sometimes a lot less. It would be amazing if that became a steady 20. So four more people. Four more people coming in the year. And there are people who, I'm sure, have been thinking about coming to the prayer meeting for a long time. Please come. Please come. We would love for you to come. It's very, very relaxed. And you only ever have to come to the prayer meeting for the first time once. Because once you come once, you never have to. It's never the once, the first time again. It's never the first time again. And then you can just come. It's just part of routine. And it's just a boost and an encouragement for everyone. So it would be so, so good to think about that. And if you're able to come along on a Thursday night, we would just love that. So please, I just want God to press that into your conscience and to make you think of it coming. Because it would be brilliant to have you there. And then our monthly prayer meeting. Last year, we would meet once a month on Zoom on the first Tuesday of the month. And usually we would have four people. So we only need one more. And we've made it. And you know what?

[19:38] Last Tuesday, we had six, 33%. We've exceeded their target. Again, you know, just, it just, I guess I just want to say that it's not going to take much. It's not going to take much to actually bring a really encouraging boost across all of these things. All of these things can grow. Now, as we think about growing in attendance, especially on Sundays, there's two crucial things, prayer and invitation. Prayer and invitation. In other words, asking God and asking people. And these two things go hand in hand. We want to make this a constant prayer point. We need more people to come and hear the gospel. We need the Holy Spirit to take God's word and to change people's lives. So we need to pray. But we also need to invite and we need to build a culture of invitation. Now, one of the things that I absolutely love about being the minister of Carlyway Free Church is the fact that Sunday mornings are brilliant. Sunday mornings here are fantastic. You come and it's a warm and welcoming and joyful church. We've got amazing singers, incredible musicians, a wonderful atmosphere, a beautiful building, a reasonable-ish preacher and a fantastic family that we're all part of. It's something beautiful. Sunday mornings are brilliant. And somebody told me recently, they said, who's in our church, they said, I love being part of a church that I love going to. And because if we're honest, sometimes we spend parts of our lives going to church at a duty and not because we're actually loving it. But we've got something here that is really, really special. And it's so good to be part of that. And we want to invite others into that. And I want you to remember the power of an invitation.

I don't know if anybody here has heard of Armand Duplantis. If you watch athletics, you might have heard of him. Armand Duplantis or Mondo Duplantis, as he's known as a kind of nickname. He's a pole vaulter and he is in a league of his own. So he is incredible. He's the Olympic champion, the world champion, the European champion, the indoor champion, multiple world record holder. He is the best pole vaulter that the world has ever seen. He is in a category of his own. Armand Duplantis is just at another level. Invitations are the Armand Duplantis of mission. In other words, we can do lots of things to encourage people to church. We can put stuff on social media. We can send leaflets to people's doors. We can put stuff online. We can put on events. We can put a poster on the wall. All of that's good and helpful. But none of it is as effective as inviting someone to church. Invitation is in a league of its own. And the thing that I love is the thing that God has made most effective for getting people to come to church is the thing that everyone can do.

everyone can invite someone. And so I want you this year to look at your family and your friends and your neighbors and your colleagues, people who are new to the village, people who have been here for years. And I want you to look at them and think, I am asking God and I'm asking them. Prayer and invitation go hand in hand. We also want to grow in terms of spiritual disciplines. Now, spiritual disciplines is the phrase that gets used quite often to describe the amazing privileges that we can access as Christians. So we can talk to God in prayer. We can read the infallible Word of God in the Bible. We can offer up praise to Him in worship. We can serve Him in our lives with the gifts that He's given us. And these are extraordinary privileges. But to make good use of them, we need discipline and effort. And so that's why spiritual disciplines is a term that often gets used. Please don't think of spiritual disciplines as like a kind of nasty thing where someone's beating you over a stick. It's not that at all. It's like discipline about being healthy and exercising and really fulfilling your potential. And we want to think about how we can grow in these areas. So I look at my life and I think, do I want to pray 25% more than I did last year? Most definitely. And by prayer, I don't necessarily mean length. I mean frequency. So often I'll pray in the morning and then I'll have no word of praying for the rest of the day. And I'd love it if I remembered actually throughout the day to stop and pray even just for a couple of minutes. Bible reading, 25% more Bible reading. Could I ditch a few percentage points from BBC Sport and up a few percentage points of my Bible reading? Of course I could. And so could you. Maybe not BBC Sport, but whatever it is that you read. We could all do that. Meditation. There's a good thing to think about. When we talk about our discipleship, we'll often talk about reading and praying. But we must remember it's not just read and pray. We need to read and pray and think. Read and pray and think. Think about what God is saying in his word. Think about how we can apply it to our lives. Think about the majestic love of God shown to us in Jesus. We want that to grow and increase. Another spiritual discipline that's very common in the Bible and very common in church history, but not common at all in our lives, is fasting. And yet it's such a valuable thing for us to do. And that can be done in terms of food, you know, even maybe just for a morning or even if you want it for a day. But it doesn't necessarily have to be about food. A social media fast would be a good thing for many of us, I'm sure. The whole idea of fasting is just to give yourself a bit of space in your life to pray and to focus on God. And even if you did it once this year, if I did it once this year, then it would become more than what I did last year. 25% more singing. So if you sing, sing 25% louder. If you don't sing, we've got four singings in each service.

[26 : 01] Have a go at singing for one of them. Even if it's really quiet, I don't mind. But think, I'm going to do that more. And maybe, and one of the most important ones, 25% more talking to each other about how amazing Jesus is. And we want to do that as Christians together, and we want to do that with people who aren't yet Christians. In all of these ways, we want to grow. We want to grow in our health as Christians. Likewise, hospitality. This has always been a massive part of the church for both evangelism and discipleship. If you look at Jesus, he constantly ate with people. He went to Matthew's house and ate with tax collectors and sinners. In John 12, after Lazarus has been raised from the dead, the next thing you find is they're all having a meal together. Early church was the same. So much of the life of the early church was round a dinner table. In fact, the Lord's Supper was celebrated as part of a meal called the agape. And this is also a very rich and precious part of our heritage in Lewis. But it's not something that happens much today. Hospitality on our island is plummeting in terms of how much it happens. And we live in a day now where people are nervous about it, people are reluctant, people are hesitant to ask people, and people are hesitant to even accept the invitations that they are given. And as a result, all of us are missing out on something beautiful.

To eat together, to spend time together, to have hospitality, to receive it, to show it, is so, so beautiful. And so let's do 25% more of it this year. And so whatever that may be, it's like, well, if you had, you know, I don't know, if you had someone around once a month, have someone twice a month, three times this year, or whatever, but think, oh, could I have a wee bit more? Could I increase this? And it doesn't have to be dinner. And can I just say, if it is dinner, make it an easy dinner. It can be bacon rolls, it can be soup, it can be just something dead easy. It doesn't have to be fancy at all. But it doesn't have to be dinner. It could be coffee, it could be a walk, it could even be watching the football together. And as part of this, we want to think about visiting people, especially those who are housebound. That's a wonderful thing to do as well. And again, please, when I say this, I'm just, I feel guilty saying all this, because I feel like I'm loading you all with stuff to

do. I just want you to think, can I do this a wee bit more? Not a whole lot more, but just a wee bit more, because it will be so beneficial for us. And one of the things that would be really brilliant to increase is staying after the service to talk to each other.

That's such a beautiful and precious thing to do, to stay behind, to chat. Please always be on the lookout for people to talk to. Please, please, please always just be aware, oh, there's somebody, they're not speaking to anybody. Go and chat to them. You know, it's a really helpful and kind thing to do. And I know a lot of folk have to dash away, but it'd be so good for people to stay a wee bit more and to have that time together. Because once Monday morning comes, life is so busy and we don't have the chance to do it. Sunday is a great opportunity to spend time together. One of the many magnificent things about Jesus is that he loved spending time with people. And we just want to follow his example more and more in the year ahead. And then last of all, helping those who are in need. Now, I don't feel in many ways that I need to say too much about this because you have been so incredibly good at that. And there have been so many wonderful ways in which you've given up your time and your energy and your money and your resources to help those in need. There are so many times in the last few months that I've gone to visit people and I have seen knitting needles working for the gospel in people's houses. I think that's so cool. And I just love that, that people are giving of their time, even in their housebound years for the work of the gospel. But the key thing is that we need to keep it up. And the key thing is that I need to talk to my generation and the generation below me, because we have got so, so much to learn from the generation above us. So my generation, the kind of, I'm early 40s now, and the generation below me, when it comes to generosity, when it comes to caring for those who are in need, when it comes to giving us to time, giving of time to help others. We have got so much to learn from the kayaks and botaks in our community. And we want to take that up and we want to model that to others as well. So there's loads of things that we can do. And if any of you got ideas for how we could help those in need, tell me and we'll go for it because we want this to increase as well. So I really hope that that does not sound like I'm burdening you. I really don't want it to sound like that, but I just, we've got an amazing opportunity and we want to use it as much as we can. Last of all, I just want to say that all of this should shape our posture for 2025 as a church. And what I want to say is that as a church, we should have a posture of optimism, confidence, and urgency as we go into this year. And all of these have a rock solid theological basis. So we can be optimistic because Jesus is risen. He's at the right hand of God.

He's poured out his spirit. He's building his church and he is not saying, come with me and we'll fail. No, he's saying, come with me and sow the seed and the harvest will come. And so often we can gravitate towards negativity, thinking it won't work, it won't happen, but we've got so many reasons to be optimistic and we will honor God with our optimism as we look ahead to the coming year. Confidence.

[32 : 11] Confidence. Again, so often we lack confidence, we feel weak, we feel like we just want to shrink back and hide. But as we seek to grow as a church, nothing ever depends on us. Without Jesus, we can do nothing, but we are not without Jesus. And so we can be confident. And confident does not mean being arrogant. We're doing everything with meekness and humility, but we are serving an amazing God who is strong and who is powerful and who is victorious and who desires that all people should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. We can be optimistic, we can be confident, and we need to be urgent. You cannot have a biblical eschatology without a posture of urgency because our time is short.

People need to seek the Lord while he may be found. They need to call on him while he's near. We need to go out to the highways and the hedges and compel people to come in. And we need to go into 2025 realizing that now is the favorable time. Now is the day of salvation. Pessimism and negativity and doom and gloom about the mission of the church have no theological basis whatsoever. Doom and gloom is the devil's work. Optimism, confidence, and urgency is the posture that the gospel gives us. And so this is our vision for 2025. And I want us to pray about this and think about this. I want it to fuel our prayers as we pray every day. I want it to motivate our hearts as we seek to see people come to know Jesus and as we seek to grow in our faith. And I want this vision to change what you and I will do this week. I want it to change what you and I will do this week. And I want the Holy Spirit to move us to think I could send them a message. I could send them a card. I could knock on their door.

I could help at finders because we need more leaders for finders. Or whatever it might be, I want the Holy Spirit to press and stir up your heart and my heart to change what we do this week. Because if this is going to happen, it's only going to happen if we muck in together as we seek to serve and honor Jesus. And so I hope that as we share that vision together, I hope you can see that you are part of this. And I hope that if anyone here who's not maybe yet sure if they're a Christian, I hope that even right now you're thinking, you know what, stuff it. I'm just going to do it. I'm just going to follow Jesus. And I'm going to lay the old behind me and I'm going to press into this new year with my eyes on my Savior. I'm going to hear his call. For 2025, we want to grow by 25%. And after all of that, the last thing I want to say is that I hope I'm wrong. I hope 25% is nowhere near enough. Amen. Let's pray.