



Long Range Planning: Vision and Creativity in Missions¹

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Everyone talks about long-range planning. The problem is that much long-range planning is nothing but short-range planning stretched out. True long-range planning (and frankly, I don't even want to call it that; I'd rather call it futuristic planning) is planning that accounts for the discontinuities that may occur. Short-range planning doesn't usually take into account discontinuities.

A discontinuity is the assumption that something that may occur right about here will fundamentally change the path. It is not to be equated with linear planning. That is, when we began, we were at A; now we're at B. So what do we plan? How to get to C, right? A linear plan is but an extension of what we have already experienced and know. (A linear plan is not necessarily a straight-line plan; it can be a curvi-linear plan which means that you know that there are some things in their normal course are not a straight line, but they are a predictable line.) Linear planning is fine for the short haul, but if we are really serious about long-range planning in a troubled world, we have to take into account what's called discontinuity.

Now the problem is when you start dealing with discontinuity, people say, "How can you tell?" You can't. So you don't plan in a single plan; you plan with alternative plans. If a certain calamity occurs, for example, what are we going to do? A futuristic frame of mind anticipates discontinuities, and most discontinuities are of a negative sort. Therefore, as futurists, when habitually think about dark events, the whole theme then takes on a tone of pessimism, and someone will say, "If you were really people of faith, you wouldn't talk that way." Then you're trapped. That's part of the problem we have in mission planning today.

There are some situations where we will want to intervene vigorously move things toward change. I'm also aware that the greater part of wisdom says, "Let us consider soberly the discontinuities and plan accordingly." Long-range planning then, has a very different meaning in futuristic perspective, because it means accounting for discontinuities, taking account of what could happen.

Vision, down through the history of God dealing with his people, is available at crucial moments when God does this, that, or the other to hold people still long enough so that he can open them up again. It's a human tendency to lock down on familiar experience. One of the greatest moments of vision, in my judgment, was Peter's housetop vision at Joppa. After the persecutions in Jerusalem, and the church was on the edge, but moving out with the gospel, all of a sudden, it was in God's plan to make a great encounter between the Christian experience vested in the Jewish people and the spiritual hunger in the Romans exemplified in Cornelius. The Romans are already moving down the road, and God seems to say, I have them on the way now, but I know that the guy they're going to see isn't ready. Because if there's ever a case of a closed guy, that's him!"

I can't help but think of ourselves in the place so often of Peter, so right about so many things, and so ready to do certain things, but closed to what God wants us to do. Do you ever put yourself in that place?

¹ Ted Ward. Long Range Planning: Vision and Creativity in Missions. Excerpted from an address at a conference in New York with representatives of mission organizations, 1980s

The great sheet was let down, and the voice from heaven said, "Take and eat." He knew it. "I know what's going on: I'm getting a test, and the right answer is no, right? I know what those things are: I'm not going to eat that stuff." He's closed. He's already well aware of what it is that God wants him to eat and not eat. Was he wrong in that? No! He was right. He was going on the premises of the best light he ever had. You have to be very compassionate about Peter; you have got to be aware that if you had been there and had been learned, sensitive, and concerned about God, you would have said the same thing. Then, "While he was still pondering . . ." He's trying to figure out exactly how to put this event into his system, then the clatter on the trail affects his life. Because of that moment of enlargement of his perspective, and he didn't yet have the meaning of it.

Then God gives him the human encounter with people who say, "We need help." It would have been very human to say, "It's a trick! Don't go!" In fact that would have been the better part of wisdom. But Peter allows that God has brought a discontinuity. "This is going to be different. Something new." And he has the faith to say, "Yes, I'll go," and the reassurance of his companions to encourage him on the way and go along with him.

That is a very precious moment in Peter's life and in the life of the church. But notice that it has a lot of elements in it that are a lot like what we are confronting today in thinking about missions.

We have a lot of habits built up from the way things have always been. We are no longer dealing with the church that is *our* product. God is raising up leaders, and this produces a discontinuity. We're no longer living in a time when that church needs the same kinds of continued technological resources, the same holding in place of the same old institutions. Nationalism is causing people to say, "We want to run our own institutions, and therefore we're going to have to do it our way. We can't do it your way because it's too costly, and we don't want to depend and be beholden on you." That's discontinuity.

And just like Peter, we look at the sheet and say, "God, I know the answer to that one. We've dealt with that all along. I've always been a good Jew. I know what you have said about diet. I know what you said about what is and what isn't fit to eat. I know the answer. Now you're telling me I'm wrong?" See, Peter's moment of tension was not with other human beings—it was with God himself! I think sometimes in our mission strategy and planning we pretend the problem is a conflict of people when sometimes our leadership conflict may be with people *and* God. So let us not personalize and humanize everything. Let's be aware that God has to bring his visions to bear on people, to open people to what it is that is going to happen in the human encounter so that they can respond in God's way to it.

I'm just saying that we should identify to that extent with Peter, and say, "God, I accept myself to be a person who, like Peter, has a view of right and wrong that is based on a past experience; that has been in itself evaluated and rewarded; and yet God free me enough through some kind of vision that I can accept that which has your hand in it." I think that should be the spiritual level of the Christian perspective on futurism with reference to mission and mission planning.

Creativity is concerned with that capacity to see things the way they haven't been seen before. In the human experience, creativity is often a divergent way of handling reality. There are convergent ways of handling reality where we come together and become, in effect, less creative and more collective. Divergency accepts the rightness of being different; and there is a time in leadership today for people who have different visions to speak them and speak them clearly—hence the word creativity with reference to planning. God is doing magnificent things in our time. If we are locked into a given place, a given ministry, a given group's work, all we will see is that limited perspective.

So much for these backgrounds. Let me share with you some primary concerns. First, I'm very concerned about issues in the changing world. Third World leaders say "We don't want to

become like the West, but we want all the things, all the technologies, of the West.” And somehow they can’t see the values that come with those things. That concerns me.

Second, I am concerned that we have institutionalized missionary deployment to the point where one can’t recognize the genius of New Testament Christianity. We build institutions and we institutionalize the institution. We put everybody to work in terms of institutionalized roles and now the Third World church is plagued with all kinds of secondhand institutions. We created that problem! What habits, customs, and assumptions do we make today that are out of touch with local realities? This is a key question, and I would ask each of you to begin a catalog of your own experiences, reflecting on the habits, customs, and assumptions that you make within your organization, within your work, that are really out of touch with local reality. My second question for you is, “What should missionaries be in the world that is about to be?”

In conclusion, all education expresses some image of the future, and I submit that by extrapolation or extension of that, all missions express some image of the future. What image of the future does missions express within your area of responsibilities? Quite often I find people adding layer upon layer of remedy without ever having diagnosed the core of the problem. So when we ask the question, “What are mission strategies and practices that are under threat?” we’re not just simply assuming that mission strategies and practices are right, and that the threats are evil. In fact, some of the practices and strategies themselves might be our own internal flaw.

There are two ideas out of futurism that I think will help us. One, the conceding that there are disjunctions in the course of human events; that not all human events flow in nice, neat, orderly, linear progression. We tend to build our concepts on the *predictability* of events. How do you account for things that you can’t anticipate? The second contribution of futurism speaks to this point: the building of scenarios; building best-case and worst-case scenarios. A scenario is a set of if/then statements. For instance, if this occurs, then we will need to do this; if this, then that; if some other, then some other. Just as surely as you can’t plan for all eventualities, and certainly you cannot anticipate all possible sources of disjunction in human events; nevertheless, you can anticipate and consider those things that seem to have realistic potential for change.

Someone asked me, “How do you deal with this without being totally overwhelmed? You have so many different possibilities, and they all interact.” You have two choices, it seems to me. You can say, “There’s too much to deal with, therefore I won’t. I’ll spend my time doing more profitable things; things that seem to have their own validity and value.” Or, you say, “I’ll do what I can do about those things that I can at least become conscious of, and I’ll keep my antenna out to pick up signals.”

There is such a thing as being responsible, and that requires a decision about what sorts of things in the way of disjunction one must be able to cope with. I think that is what scenario-writing is intended to do. For many people who use futuristic approaches to planning, that is how they make it work. They try to write alternative views of where they are going to be at a given moment, given several different alternatives of the times ahead. Our task as futurists then, is to help a group think about things which would have an edifying effect on the life of that group, and on the continuing flexibility of the responsiveness of that group.

Again, the major issue for us in this conference is effective missions, not proving or disproving the value or worth of futurism. We don’t have to wait for the future to determine whether or not things are dysfunctional. We really do need to be self-critical as persons and as organizations and get very serious about some of the categories in which some of these dysfunctions are emerging.