



The Church in the Year 2000: Good News and Bad News¹

Ted Ward

The concern in this keynote is that Christians anticipate what lies ahead—wisely, actively, and constructively. (No claims or comments are intended in reference to the projects collectively identified as the *AD 2000 Movement*.)

Only God knows the future—our visions are subjective and cloudy at best. But we should try to look ahead as best we can because *long-range planning* requires a responsible anticipation and estimation of what lies ahead.

Leaders and managers must read the *signs of the times* and derive meanings. Not to do so assures that everything is a surprise. When preparation is lacking, the inevitable climate of change becomes unbearable. Christian faith does not demand ignorance. Christ is not honored by self-imposed blindness.

Consider the probable meanings of six trends that are apt to continue into the year 2000:

As Large Churches Become Larger

Staff roles become more specialized, narrow, compartmentalized. Senior leadership faces greater difficulty staying in touch. Leadership becomes more institutional; management becomes more bureaucratic. Church experience becomes more remote from neighborhood; commuting distances and times increase.

As Small Churches Become Smaller

Time and resources for pastoral and organizational leadership training are reduced. Ineffective leadership and management become more common. Churches are less able to support complex programs. Bi-vocational ministry becomes necessary. Churches become more mono-cultural.

As Churches Become More Centered on Functional Service

Greatest popularity of churches among those whose personal definitions of need are the clearest. Images of wellness are unclear and unpopular. Church-attenders expect therapy and/or entertainment and tend to make comparisons with professional counterparts in health services, television and show-business. Audience and onlooker behaviors replace service roles and active participation. Most significant casualty: worship and effective emphasis on Bible.

As Inter-Ethnic Conflict Heats Up

Need for motives and skills in reconciliation becomes more pressing. Christian roles in community and workplace are more in contrast with prevailing social norms. Relationship of churches to social and political issues becomes more intense and vital. Christian witness and

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ministry become more dependent on effective social action. Testimony of effective Christianity becomes more evident, not always well received but respected in ambivalent way.

As Government Regulation Increases

Concerns about equity and safety constitute the major apparent motivations, but suspicions about interference increase. Churches find resistance necessary to prevent the “camel’s nose” from undermining religious freedom. Difficult decisions about which battles are worth fighting bring internal stress to churches. Dissenting provides ammunition for anti-church lobbying and legislation.

As Families Become Less Coherent

Competition for time and resources increasingly puts churches in conflict with families. Tensions within families increase; needs for help from the church increase. Many churches are unable to provide effective help for family development. Churches that develop effective assistance to the family, including day-care, after-school tutoring and recreation centers, become enormously popular.

Leadership and the Church

The issue of who is really in charge of the church is one of the key issues that makes management of the church fundamentally different from management in most other human enterprises. It is quite clear that even in a major corporation, a board of directors sits at the top of policy. Sometimes in our churches, we have boards, deacons, elders, trustees, who behave somewhat like a board of directors in a corporation, and they make the decisions. But most of us know that the board of directors of any corporation is sensitive to the possibility of their own re-electability, and ultimately, there is some kind of an accountability to the stockholder.

The “owners” of the church are only partly analogous to the financial ownership of a corporation. The church of Jesus Christ is not a corporation. The church of Jesus Christ operates with two facets of ownership. In the first place, Jesus Christ said, “I will build my church.” I suspect most of us here would define the ministries that we are engaged in as building the church of Jesus Christ.

The second part of our dual responsibility within the ownership of the church is the ownership by the people of God, because the church is ultimately the people of God in corporate manifestation. To use smaller words, it’s the people of God getting things done on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sometimes as we manage churches, we forget some of those details. As churches become larger, and add more and more staff, it is quite common that people find themselves in an awkward position within the structures of the church. In one respect we do have some clear-cut accountability, and most of us work for the senior pastor. But leadership is a responsibility of all pastoral ministry and not just the senior pastor. This has to be something we share. It is one thing to organize lines of control and responsibility clearly. But it is quite a different thing to truly be the church.

One of the problems that we may confront in the increasingly large church is senior management who block the flow of policy information up the line. All it takes is one person in a management series to be a one-way person, and sooner or later the church is not the church.

I believe that the church is a unique human enterprise. That’s one way to define it. But it is more than that. It is the work of God in and through his people in the world. The very first sentence in the outline you were given states, “The concern in this keynote is that Christians anticipate what lies ahead wisely, actively, and constructively.” Who do I mean by “Christians”? Do I mean all people in the church except the managerial types? That’s pretty absurd isn’t it? I get the impression in some situations in our churches, that the management group is selected, organized, assigned, and trained, as

if they weren't first and foremost Christians. Every one of us, I believe, has a responsibility to be about the business of understanding where we are, what's going on, and how we can effectively relate to the tasks that confront the church of Jesus Christ in our time.

Over the years, I have done a lot of work in the matter of futures—not commodity futures on the market. I don't even go to the casinos! I stay far away from that kind of wild-eyed setting. As a social scientist, however, I have been concerned with understanding the times in which we live in such a way as to be able to anticipate rather than to be surprised at every thing that happens. Most of us read the newspapers to see what happened yesterday; some of us read the newspapers to see what's going to happen, because we're not just processing history, we're projecting history. I think a good manager has to make that distinction. It's one thing to process history; it's quite another thing to project history. When our Lord asks us to pay attention to the signs, he invites us to pay attention to what is going on with reference to what is apt to come next. This is a biblical invitation. I suggest to you that it applies much more broadly to the responsible handling of God's resources.

Truly only God knows the future. As a person who is concerned with the future, and understanding optional futures, I am not presuming upon that which is God's alone to know. Nor am I making any claim about any particular kind of foreknowledge based upon an unusual relationship with God. I would not claim a gift of prophecy in reference to "seeing the future

What is the difference between anticipating something and worrying about something? That's really what this session is all about: How do we anticipate free of worry. We anticipate free of worry by taking at face value the scriptural claim that God is in control, and nothing is going to happen that does not have God's plan embedded within it. That lets you sleep at night.

See Matthew 6: 25-30: "Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow, reap, or store away in barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Here our Lord wisely puts it beyond the matter of advice into a challenge that says, "Show me what good comes from worrying? What difference does it make if you're worrying?" "Why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow! They do not labor or spin; yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was not dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grasses of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, oh you of little faith!" "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

We need to, on one hand, be responsible stewards, which does involve storehouses and barns and careful management of resources, not in the spirit of worry and anxiety, but in the spirit of responsible acceptance of that which God has made available to us for his ministry and his work in this world. The ultimate issue is: Do not do it with a spirit of worry. *Worrying tends to make you incompetent. We are talking about competent anticipation that takes steps of action.*

It seems to me that our task is to anticipate the future, to challenge the future, and to change the future. That may seem terribly presumptuous coming from a Christian. Let me tell you how it works. God has foreordained; God has planned, but within his ordination and within his plan, he has taken account of people like you and me, and he has put us in that plan. He is assuming that as we act in the strength of the Holy Spirit, we will be playing a role in a future that would otherwise not have us in it. If we are to understand history from a Christian perspective, we would have to observe that the *influence of evil in this world is profound, but not absolute*. The influence of godliness is not altogether manifest (we might add the word "yet") *but absolutely persistent*. Why? Because God has elected to keep us in this world. We are Christ's representatives in a fallen world. There is no other way to understand the times, but to understand the good news/bad news. When we talk about the year 2000, if we talk only in terms of bad news, we have evidenced a failure to continue Christian hope. The year 2000 will not be absolutely evil. The year 2000 will not be absolutely good. I can also say this about the year

2010! There is good news, but as long as this world groans and labors in the process of yet to see its fulfilling redemption, there is also going to be bad news.

The issue is not how are we going to get everybody converted by the year 2000. On the other hand, if we fail to look ahead, we are in a condition of poor stewardship.

There are Christians among us who are so convinced that the only thing we need to do is proclaim the salvation message and bring people to Christ, and that alone will change the future. Yes, as far as that goes, that's not a bad image. There are others of us who are convinced that if you just change society, then all people would see God more clearly. Well, I have a little less comfort with that one, because I've never really seen that one at work. It makes a good thesis, but I'm not excited about it because it doesn't seem like that sharp an investment. I would rather have both! I would rather have a concern for that change of the heart that is the business of the individual's encounter with Jesus Christ. Yet I would not stop there. I would expect and encourage that and work toward involvement of those people with that heart-change to be engaged in community building, and bring community building to affect their societies. That can be very explicit. One of the things that has unfortunately divided Christianity in much of the twentieth century is the presumption that you can't do both—that you have to go to either extreme.

Middle-size churches are on the decline; very small churches and very large churches are on the increase in terms of where the people in the US and Canada go to church.

To some extent, this pattern is repeated in other communities around the world. In other words, today we're in the era of the emerging super-church. (You wouldn't believe the size of some of the super churches in Korea. They put our biggest to shame in terms of their numbers of affiliated. If you think those numbers are hollow or inflated, just show up any day of the week and notice the tremendous traffic of people in various kinds of church activities ranging from therapeutic group settings to long, steady prayer sessions that just go on around the clock in church after church.) Certainly within our own context we're aware that the churches we are in today are unlike the churches we were in earlier in life.

The point is that the large churches and the small churches will continue to grow apace, and the middle-size churches will tend toward collapse. Will they stay that way? I don't know. When you see a trend, ask yourself: "Is that apt to continue?" If it's apt to continue, then take it seriously. If you don't then your plans will be amorphous. It's quite okay to be wrong. One of the things that may happen is that some house church involvement may merge with some of the super church involvement as it has in Latin America, where we see a lot more of the micro-churches becoming affiliated with the mega churches.

William Parnell, in *The Coming Race Wars* describes what he sees as the potential for a fundamental discontinuity in American life. He points out the abundant, overdue causes for God's judgment on America. It's an important book, and it looks at discontinuity. But most of us in a violent society don't build discontinuities or disturbing trend lines into our planning.

A number of issues may continue to confront us in the next several years. Your list will not be the same as mine, but for our purposes, I have identified the following:

As churches grow, staff roles become more specialized. If you are in a small church where a handful of people handle all of the leadership responsibilities, you likely are dealing with people who are flexible, at least to some extent, and almost like interchangeable components. In larger churches, leadership roles have become more specialized, narrowly defined, and quite commonly compartmentalized and professionalized. But in an era of compartmentalization and specialization, situations also arise where churches don't look inward for resources; they go out into the market increasingly to hire someone to take specialized responsibility.

At some point, we have to evaluate our tendencies to hire professionals against a biblical ecclesiology. What do we believe about the gifts of the Spirit to the church? Do you see the dilemma?

Let's continue. Senior leadership faces greater difficulties staying "in touch" with God's people. After a certain number of parishioners, nobody stays in touch with everybody. That has implications. The super church will have to divide into sub-congregational groupings each with a pastoral type person who connects with them. You have to think about that, and budget for it.

Similarly, in the larger church matters that could be managed with person to person agreements, becomes a matter of bureaucracy—rules and policies. The people of God need training and development in reconciliation skills. Bureaucracy tends to work against that. It tends to work in the direction of a mechanical legalistic way of solving things. Ultimately, it demeans persons. *Control motives are basic and deep in the human psyche. Control and fear and pride are among the most pervasive sins in the churches today.*

The church experience becomes more remote from neighborhoods. Commuting distances and times increase. Today it is easier and easier for people to go to church and go home and forget about it, because even their identity with church has less meaning. As commuting times and distances increase, the church becomes less of a neighborhood reality for children as well. Don't fail to take into account how that impacts how children view the church.

Now as small churches grow smaller, one of the problems is that the time and resources for pastoral organizational leadership training are severely reduced. The task demand of ministry has increased. In a large church, there are more salaried staff to help meet the demands. In the smaller church, the pastor is in no position to take the time to go get more training. Further, the small church pastor must become bi-vocational to survive. Bi-vocationalism, is a good news/bad news matter. There is a case for bi-vocationalism in certain societies, and in certain kinds of communities. For example, some super churches have huge-salaried staffs all on one-third and one-half salaries, expecting those people also to work in the society on two-thirds and one-third salaried jobs in order to have the church's staff involved in the total work of the society.

In general, a bi-vocational pastor can and usually does stay in touch with the community. That's the good news. The bad news, however, is that the pastor is less available for ministry. Yet, the good news of that may be that church people will emerge in their leadership and in their sharing of responsibilities. In other words, if our pastor is only half-salaried, some of the rest of us have to organize to help out. What happens in such situations is that the church may become more truly the church: a sharing group of people bearing one another's burdens, and serving even in pastoral ways in relationship to one another. That pattern of bi-vocational ministry is well established in the history of the church, and generally is regarded as a very viable model. What we're seeing today in many urban situations, especially in ethnic churches, is the rise of bi-vocational ministry in small congregations. Good news and bad news. Such a person is going to have a difficult time finding time for everything.

We can't leave out the issue of mono-culturalism. Generally speaking, the very small church tends to be limited in its cultural mix. Many super churches are similarly mono-cultural. Many churches have moved to the suburbs in order to maintain some of their characteristic as mono-cultural churches, and as a result, they have created a mono-cultural neighborhood

One of the most dire needs in the world is for people who have competencies interculturally, and especially who have the skills of a conciliator, or peacemaker. Difference is what causes human tension historically and remains true today. Our nation is vulnerable because we live in a complex tapestry of differences. We must be the producing engine of people of reconciliation. Not isolated people who are simply proud to be whatever they are and to be separated from those who are different.