

Leading From the Future

By Stephen E. Brimmer

Today's leaders must be forward thinking. By projecting out 5-10 years to envision changes in the social/cultural/political landscape, technology, and environmental conditions, leaders can make better decisions in the present.

In 2007, the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Churches (CEEP) commissioned the Institute for the Future (IFTF) to create a 10-year forecast of faith in the future. Although IFTF - an independent non-profit think tank - has been creating 10-year forecasts for the past 40 years, for the first time they focused on faith in the future. The study considers changes *external* to the church that may provoke some kind of change within the faith community. Forecasting the future differs from predicting the future in that it explores what *could* happen rather than declaring what *will* happen. Even if one doesn't agree, the forecast is still useful if it stimulates strategic thinking to enlighten decision makers. Johansen (2007) presents the following 15 "provocations from the future" (next 10 years) that resulted from the study.

Fifteen provocations from the future

- VUCA World – Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) will increasingly characterize our existence as we advance into “an amplified world of extreme urgency, unpleasant surprises, and enigmatic choices” (Johansen, 2007). Will people turn to religion for stabilization?
- Extreme Climate Variability – There is a growing consensus in both mainstream science and public opinion that our planet is at risk. Environmental, social, and health concerns will likely generate changes in public policy. Will proposed solutions unite or divide us over political and ideological lines?

- The Rich/Poor Gap – Media images increasingly make economic differences more pronounced, creating a major source of social unrest. Urban areas are particularly vulnerable. Will violence and terror escalate?
- Personal Empowerment – Self-Agency, Self-Customization, and Self-Organization are three bellwether behaviors of the future. Engaged consumers will be the norm and they will force producers of goods and services to accommodate a high degree of personalization. What effect might this have on the future of faith?
- Grassroots Economies – The internet is allowing new economic structures to emerge, forming new models of competition such as e-Bay and Craig's List. Informal bottom-up economics will be a driving force of the future. Are top-down hierarchical organizations in danger of extinction?
- Smart Networking – Technologies enable social connectivity with fast global communication. Smart networking carries potential for great good as well as great evil. Will electronic networking replace the need for physical gatherings?
- Polarizing Extremes – Extreme views are easily proliferated on the web, which also assists extremists in finding others who share their strangeness. Will valuing of diversity result in increasing social polarization?
- High-Impact Religions – A volatile and uncertain world is vulnerable to religions that promote self-righteous confidence that one's beliefs are right and everyone else is wrong. Extreme fundamentalism will increasingly attract those who are distraught over ambiguity. Will Christians who share their faith be dismissed as intolerant?

- Health Insecurity – The future includes global health crises and ultimately a global health economy. Will individuals be held accountable for personal behaviors like smoking or obesity that impact public health costs?
- Body Hacking – This refers to invasive tampering with one’s own body, reminiscent of computer hacking. Hackers exploit medical technology advancements to take control of their physical, mental, and social well-being. Body modifications will be routine. Will this create social barriers between ‘enhanced’ and non-enhanced people?
- Boomers Reinvent Aging – The concept of retirement will morph into “redirection” as aging boomers resist the forces of nature and their implications. Some will work longer because they cannot afford to retire and others because they want to. What else might be affected by large numbers of boomers living and working longer?
- Digital Youth – While boomers tend to see technology as tools and toys, they are simply extensions of one’s self for today’s youth. Rapid changes are redefining generations so that those under 25 feel out of touch with someone 6 years younger. How will technology affect relationships between generations?
- Urban Wilderness – Moderate sized and megacities will grow so rapidly they will be unable to build infrastructure fast enough. Swelling populations will contribute to social unrest, poverty, impure water, and health problems. What might people do to survive in extreme conditions?
- Digital Physical Blend – We will live in an “always-on” world where the virtual and the physical are linked. Continuous connectivity means people will mix their online identity with their real-world presence. What social and spiritual threats or opportunities might this create?

- Dilemmas of Difference – We will live in an increasingly heterogeneous world with growing diversity of age, income, ethnicity, and values. Will an awareness of our differences also contribute to an appreciation of things we have in common?

We live in uncertain times. Change occurs more often, more quickly, and with more impact than it did for our grandparents. Today, leadership approaches must adjust to these new realities by anticipating what might be coming and preparing strategically for a wide range of possibilities. Ministry leaders cannot be content with approaches that have worked in the past. They must look at trends in religion as well as a broad spectrum of other societal factors to anticipate changes in their current and prospective audience. Leaders who wait for changes to occur before engaging in planning or worse, wait to see how others are responding will likely discover they have faded into irrelevance. Today's VUCA world rewards those who lead from the future.

References:

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