

Using Foresight as a Catalyst for Change

By Stephen E. Brimmer

Does your church or faith-based organization need a bolder, more creative vision? Leading from the future, through foresight, is now widely recognized as both effective and essential. As practiced in strategic planning, foresight serves as a catalyst for courageous and innovative vision formulation. Without the mindset and the skills to participate in strategic foresight activities, Christian organizations and churches risk irrelevance to their communities in the not-too-distant future.

“Our planet needs a church with vision: and our church needs foresighted pastors” – Dr. Jay Gary

Strategic foresight – why is it needed?

According to author and denominational leader David T. Olson (2008) in *The American Church in Crisis*, the American church is largely unaware of the dangers that engulf it. Based on a study of more than 200,000 American churches over the past 20 years, the faith community as a whole has failed to keep up with population growth and many, if not most, denominations and local churches are in decline. The Millennium Effect, as understood by Olson, has introduced new and alarming challenges that could result in a social-spiritual ‘earthquake’. Two fault lines created by the tectonic forces of cultural and spiritual shifts exert great pressure against each other where secularization of society, traditional American Christianity, and new expressions of Christianity simultaneously clash. Strategic foresight examines the trends and patterns identified by studies like Olson’s and seeks emerging insights that suggest opportunities to help influence a better future.

Churches tend to be more inclined toward hindsight than foresight. Both are important and needed. *Hindsight* looks back while *foresight* looks forward and *insight* occurs in the present when interpretation of the past and anticipation of the future converge. Churches that exist to guard tradition generate cultures dominant with controls, constants, and conventional thinking. However, when a faith community embraces forward thinking they tend to produce creativity, connections, and collaborative vision.

Without sacrificing the integrity of scripture, churches should seek to be relevant within their context. When communities view churches as irrelevant, attendance decreases and as people leave, their money goes with them. In some cases, the resulting pain of financial crisis including loss of staff and property is a catalyst for needed change. We have designed a Futurecasting experience to help churches avoid or reverse the damaging effects of irrelevance. Done well, strategic foresight helps Christian organizations prepare for both adversity and opportunity.

Strategic foresight – what is it?

“A prudent person foresees the danger ahead and takes precautions; the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences.” (Proverbs 22:3, NLT)

Strategic foresight is anticipatory wisdom. According to educator and futurist Richard Slaughter (1995), foresight “pushes the boundaries of perception forward” in four ways:

- Consequence assessment - projecting implications of present actions and decisions
- Early warning and guidance - detecting and avoiding problems before they occur
- Strategy formulation - considering the present implications of possible future events
- Scenario development - envisioning characteristics of desired futures

Strategic foresight is a leadership capability to influence the future by detecting emerging issues and responding early. Dr. Jay Gary (2009) defines foresight as “a cognitive temporal perspective that leaders use to anticipate, clarify, and structure the future, so as to guide their organization in the present based on future opportunities”.

Strategic foresight involves a disciplined approach to considering alternative possible futures and then identifying a preferable future. It serves two important purposes:

- Enabling change – organizational change management is complex, prone to create conflict, and rarely done well. Strategic leaders employ processes such as Futurecasting to engage constituents in recognizing the legitimate need for change and participating in shaping direction for the future.
- Anticipating threats and opportunities – we live in an age of rapid change that affects current and prospective member lifestyles on a daily basis. Generational differences affect personal tastes and often exacerbate the problem. When spiritual leaders are sensitive to the changing needs and habits of their followers, they can design programs, schedules, and communication approaches to accommodate rather than frustrate them.

References:

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