

Visionary Planning for World Missions

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In the last hundred years the church has sprouted and grown in every country in the world, expanding beyond anyone's predictions. Yet because of the population explosion, even though almost two billion people call themselves Christians, never since the creation of the world have there been more lost people. About four billion people desperately need to hear the Good News, and over a billion so-called Christians urgently need a vital growing relationship with Jesus.

Problems with Planning

Missionary vision is seeing the world through God's eyes. But vision is only the first step. People with vision also need a plan. Planning includes three steps: 1) analyze the needs and opportunities, 2) set visionary goals and 3) design an action plan. A rekindled vision for the world must lead to visionary planning.

Yet visionary planning is not easy. Churches are often distracted by the pain of their own hurting people, budget worries, and the challenge of keeping programs staffed, organized and funded. Harried pastors might feel that the missions program is pushed by one ardent church committee working in competition with other committees. With so many local needs and programs, visionary missions planning is often neglected.

Visionary planning can be difficult for missionaries as well. As I write this article I am on the phone almost hourly with directors who are trying to evacuate over 70 missionaries from out-of-control violence in Liberia. This is the third time in the last six years these people have had to evacuate. When missionaries are ducking bullets, it is thoughtless to ask them for a visionary five-year plan.

Metaphors of Planning

Another obstacle to visionary planning is that we often have an inadequate mental picture of planning. Our understanding of missions is dominated by mental pictures or metaphors. These metaphors have a powerful influence on the theory and practice of missionary planning. Metaphors are often unconscious, or at least not clearly defined in our minds, yet these hidden pictures predispose us to be attracted to certain values and strategies for missionary planning. Our mental metaphors reflect our fundamental values.

The problem with hidden metaphors is that we tend to accept them uncritically, for reasons below the level of our awareness. Because metaphors influence us more than we know, our reasons for accepting or rejecting missionary strategy are largely unconscious. We are often controlled by metaphors that are inconsistent with a biblical view of missions.

The dominant missionary planning metaphor is the behaviorist model of a machine. The second metaphor is an existentialist reaction to the behaviorist model which I will call the

wild-flower metaphor. I will suggest that a developmental metaphor of pilgrimage is the best paradigm for visionary missionary planning.¹

The Missionary Machine (Behaviorist model)

Many missionary planners see the world as a machine. They are dominated by the cult of efficiency. They view the missionary enterprise as accomplishing precise goals in a predicted time frame, with the least amount of money and the fewest missionaries. Because of their passion for precision and predictability they set goals for things that can be easily counted. They wish to know exactly **what** the final result will look like, **when** it will be accomplished, and **how much** money it will cost.

People who see the task of missions mechanistically tend to have a vision of something that is very big and easy to measure. They then set a long-range timetable with several short-range plans. For such people, “going into all the world and making disciples” is too vague. They say we must first precisely define “all the world” as quantifiable people groups, and “disciples” as those who have gone through a prescribed program. They would argue that the task is completed when a specific percentage of people are attending church. Success is measured on graph paper.

But when we aim only at what we can measure we avoid the most important goals of character and holiness. As soon as we try to predict and quantify character and holiness we are forced to become legalistic. Results of missions should be measured by spiritual qualities rather than by the mere quantity of buildings or people.

The Western world has been influenced by the philosophy of logical positivism which argues that all meaning must be verifiable by empirical data. Behaviorism asserts that observable behavior is the only reality. But the Apostle Paul commands us to “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”² The mechanistic paradigm of planning promotes unhealthy practice and builds an inadequate theory of missiology. It forces one to aim for goals which can be accomplished in a specific time frame such as by the year 2000. Mechanistic visionaries do not have real vision even if they are aiming at big numbers.

Fortunately most mechanistic missiological planners have a genuine love for the Lord and a deep passion for world missions. Even though their behaviorist paradigm makes it harder for them to focus on eternal results in the hearts of people, they have helped to compel genuine concern for the eternal destiny of the world. While I am bothered by their world-view, I am challenged and encouraged by many “big thinkers” in missions.

The Missionary as a Wild Flower (Existentialist model)

While the machine metaphor makes sense to people with an analytic personality, the wild-flower metaphor is attractive to the more intuitive types. While mechanistic planners have too little tolerance for ambiguity, wild-flower planners enjoy ambiguity. The first conceives of the missionary enterprise as a sophisticated assembly line and the latter sees it as a seed to “bloom

¹ The general idea of these metaphors is adapted from an article by Lawrence Kohlberg and Rochelle Mayer, “Development as the aim of education,” *Harvard Educational Review* Vol. 42 No. 4 November, 1972, 449-496.

² 2 Corinthians 4:18

where it's planted." While the former think of church growth in terms of slide-rule analysis, some of the later are intrigued by emotional signs and wonders.

Many wild-flower missionaries see planning as a waste of time. They say the world is too uncertain to permit goal-setting. They may be so embedded in the existential present that they have no time for future planning, and they may even assume such thinking is unspiritual.

If mechanistic missionaries have their day planned in 15-minute intervals, wild-flower missionaries seldom bother to plan anything. One is management by objectives, the other is management by interruption. The primary goal is to keep busy. There is often no visionary sense of direction.

Here is an example of Joe "Wild-Flower" Missionary. He sleeps in a bit longer than he planned and never does finish his quiet time. He decides to deliver a new copy of the *Jesus* film to a near-by village. Getting into his Land Rover he notices that the tires need more air, and on his way to get the pump, he sees goats in his garden. While he's repairing the garden fence, the local carpenter walks by. They discuss the price of cement blocks for a project and then a medical emergency requires Joe to take a patient to the clinic in the next town. And so his day goes, from one activity to the next with no sense of direction. People without vision often feel burned out and exhausted from so much meaningless activity. They run around in circles and at the end of the day wonder why they don't have more of a sense of fulfillment.

The Missionary as a Pilgrim (Developmental model)

Pilgrims have a clear sense of direction even though they aren't sure where the path may lead in the near future. In contrast to mechanistic missionaries, pilgrims have their eyes open to serendipitous possibilities. Pilgrims have a strong vision of God's blessing in this world and the next. Because pilgrims have a sense of direction and a clear endpoint, they are better able to decide if an event is an unfolding opportunity or a side-track interruption.

Mechanistic vision focuses only on what can be predicted and counted. Wild-flower vision is too small and lacks focus. The pilgrim missionary is the true visionary. Pilgrim vision is like beauty. It is difficult to define, but we will recognize it when we see it.

Pilgrim planners asks three questions: 1) What is the **challenge**? 2) What is the **vision**? and 3) What are the **action** steps?³

1) Situation - Where are we?

Pilgrims are visionary realists. They move deliberately and steadily in pursuit of a clear goal. As they press on, they are also aware of the swamps, valleys and obstacles along the path. Pilgrim planners know they must understand their situation, needs, resources and opportunities.

So how does the pilgrim metaphor influence planning? At home, a church wishing to be more mission-minded needs to analyze factors in its present situation such as: current attitudes towards missions, awareness of needs, and faithfulness in praying and giving. Field missionaries need to thoughtfully assess their language ability, cultural

³ The following section is based on a model of curriculum development and evaluation by Robert Stake. "The Countenance of Educational Evaluation." *Teacher's College Record*. vol. 68, 1967, pp. 523-540.

awareness and family needs. Missionary planning teams need to work with the national church to investigate unreached people groups, examine possible cultural reasons for resistance to the gospel and assess the spiritual state of the church. Where is the church strong, and where are the areas of need? What are the challenges for theological education and opportunities for helping pastors? How politically stable is the country? What is the economic condition of the national church? How many theological schools are needed? What are the discipleship needs in the church?

When I am leading vision seminars I ask missionaries to brain-storm about factors in the present situation that reflect opportunities and challenges for planning. We fill many “flip-chart” sheets and tape them to the walls.

For example, if we were interested in reaching the Quechua people of Bolivia we would ask: how many Quechuas live in Bolivia? Where do they live? What is their world-view? What are their fears and concerns? How many of them are Christians? How many Quechua churches are there? What opportunities do pastors have for learning? What is the evangelistic vision of these churches to reach the rest of their people? Are the Scriptures available in Quechua? What is the literacy level? What efforts has God blessed in the past?

2) Vision - Where are we going?

Pilgrim planners are driven by eternal vision. They have a vision of a holy church, without stain or wrinkle.⁴ They picture people from every nation, tribe, people and language,⁵ singing the Hallelujah Chorus at the wedding feast of the Lamb.⁶ They can picture the kingdom of this world becoming the Kingdom of our God.⁷ They are motivated by a picture of what individuals and society might become if God were to bless their ministry.

The metaphor is developmental in that the vision is for the full development of people and churches. Development is an inner process that has external (though unpredictable) indicators. The vision is not for mere behavior changes that can be predicted and controlled, but for holy lives that bring glory to God. It is a vision of the growth of the Kingdom of God.⁸

I encourage our missionaries to humbly pray that the Lord will show them possible eternal results if God were to bless their ministry. I challenge them to ask the Lord for a sense of direction and for qualitative goals they can set by faith. I suggest they prayerfully write out the answer to the question, “If the Lord were to richly bless your ministry in the next five years, what might it look like?”

I want missionaries to describe a picture of results in people and in the church. Too often missionaries limit their vision to mere programs. They have a vision for using radio, literature or theological education by extension, and they define their vision by numbers and activities. While successful programs are good things, we need to force

⁴ Ephesians 5:27

⁵ Revelation 7:9

⁶ Revelation 19:7

⁷ Revelation 11:15

⁸ The developmental metaphor of pilgrimage is more fully explored in *Pilgrims in Progress: Growing through Groups*, by Jim and Carol Plueddemann (Harold Shaw Publishers, 1990)

ourselves to ask, “What are the developments in the hearts of people and in the character of the church that will change the world and endure through eternity?” Such thinking leads to a big vision of what God could do to transform people and mature the church.

It is also good to reflect on more specific parts of the big vision. “If the Lord would bless your Sunday School class or your market evangelism, what might be the eternal results?” Missionary life puts strain on families. I encourage couples to prayerfully reflect on what their marriage might be if the Lord would richly bless them.

How might a vision for Quechua ministry in Bolivia be expressed? I picture the Lord blessing this ministry and hundreds of thousands of Quechuas coming to Christ. I have a vision of what a difference the Gospel might mean for family life and social systems. I see pastors who love the Lord, love people and have the ability to teach what the Bible means in their cultural context. I see lay people actively involved in their churches and reaching out to their communities. I see Quechua missionaries crossing cultures for the sake of the Gospel. The hopes and dreams go on and on.

Missionary life tends to squelch vision. It is easy to become so overwhelmed by culture shock, limited language ability, and the frustrations of heat and dust that dynamic vision seems like a distant dream. On the sending side, even the most mission-minded churches are within a few years of a dying vision. Both missionaries and sending churches urgently need a rekindled vision of how all of heaven and earth can be influenced by God’s blessings to the nations. Such a vision will keep us going in a suffering world with courage, enthusiasm and excitement.

3) Action - How do we get there?

Vision by itself is worthless. Vision needs feet and action steps. Pilgrims know they can’t merely sit on a hill-top and dream about heaven. They must get out the map, put on their shoes and get going.

Missionaries need to plan with national church leaders about things they should be doing together that the Lord might bless to fulfill the vision. Pilgrim planners know there is no one sure method for reaching the vision, but since they have a strong sense of direction they have great creativity in working with different strategies. Since the vision is much bigger than the method, they won’t get bogged down in using only one strategy. If showing the *Jesus* film seems to bring eternal results they use it, but the film is the **means** not the end.

Action steps must be related to the challenge (“where are we?”). They must also relate to the vision (“where are we going?”). For example, Bible translation might not be a necessary action step if there is already a good translation in Bolivian Quechua. But literacy classes might be an important action step.

If the Lord shows us the need for reaching Quechua people in the mountains of Bolivia, we need to reflect on a vision of a vibrant Quechua church. We see hundreds of thousands of Quechua coming to Christ and being disciplined into churches. They sing indigenous Quechua songs, use an easy-to-understand Quechua Bible, and the church leadership is equipped to help the church grow toward maturity in Christ. Since the Quechua live in hard-to-reach mountains, a missionary strategy might include partnering with the Quechua church to develop evangelistic radio. The mission might also recruit ethno-musicologists and train people who can begin a program of theological education

by extension. The program grows out of the vision and is evaluated by how much it contributes to the hoped-for qualities in the Quechua people.

Conclusions

The missionary enterprise is in urgent need of a quiet, gracious revolution. There's a war going on between Satan and God. Yet too often we merely seek faddish methods that help us to be better assembly line workers or wild flower tenders. Too often planning reflects a vision of mere outward change or massive programs, while neglecting the most important vision of heart changes in people's lives. The most urgent need is not for better methods but for pilgrim planners who realistically assess the challenge, ask the Lord for a picture of how He might bless his church, and then plan creative and flexible actions that God might use to fulfill his purposes.

