

DP8.03 What is the Place of Strategic Planning in Christian Ministry? By Colin Marshall and Geoff Campbell

We all make plans for the ministries for which we are responsible. We make choices about how we spend our time and the 'resources' God has given in people, money and plant. We have certain goals we are trying to reach. Some of us plan just for the short term, to get through the next week or month and others develop long term plans. That is, we plan intuitively or by default.

In recent times, many churches and ministries are engaging in strategic planning using tools from the business world. Much has been published on ministry strategy and management in the last 20 years, especially from the USA, the home of the entrepreneur.

Will the use of such tools so distort the ministry and the church that it will look more like building a corporate entity rather than gathering and shepherding of the flock of God? Will we lose what is distinctive about the Christian church and ministry? Or is there a godly and wise use of such tools in planning our gospel work?

As we weigh up the place of strategic planning, there are several questions to consider.

What is Strategic Planning?

The Macquarie Dictionary describes 'strategy' as:

- i. generalship; the science or art of combining and employing the means of war in planning and directing large military movements and operations.
- ii. the use, or a particular use of this science or art
- iii. skilful management in getting the better of an adversary, esp. by the aid of maneuvering or stratagem

Although the original sphere of strategy seems to be the military enterprise, strategic planning is now applied to a variety of contexts such as business and education and it is widely used in churches and not for profit organisations.

Strategic Planning is a tool to help define our goals (Vision and Mission) and then organise our efforts to achieve the Mission and Vision.

Small organisations tend to handle this informally; often a founder may drive the plan personally day to day. However as organisations grow, the need to formalise the planning process increases. An important part of the process is communication – both in seeking input to develop the plan, and via involvement of team members in communicating progress in implementing the plan.

Strategic Planning can thereby also help address common organisational growth problems that lie behind comments such as: "we never know what we are doing from week to week around here", "nobody ever asks me for my input", "no-one cares about what I do" etc.

There are so many things we could do day to day. Most people think thousands of thoughts a day – and many of the thoughts are possible tasks we could put our energies into. A Strategic Plan helps us to choose the most important tasks and harness our resources to achieve the long term

vision. Once the really important tasks are chosen, the plan helps keep track of our progress over time and adjust our activities to reach the goal. Our activities and spending will be driven by our goals rather than filling immediate needs, tradition or political expediency.

What are the Benefits of Strategic Planning?

In summary the benefits are:

- i. We become clearer about what we are trying to achieve
- ii. We work out the best way to achieve our goals
- iii. We benefit from the input from 'many advisers' in thinking the plan through
- iv. The ownership of the goal and the tasks required to achieve the goal is increased
- v. Implementation success (generally the greatest challenge) improves
- vi. The sense of achievement is greater because we have some specific targets and milestones that we work towards, and celebrate reaching
- vii. We have a specific plan to change as the situation changes or we get better ideas. We discuss specific Plan amendments and have less general discussions that seem to lead us nowhere

What Stops us from Planning?

So why doesn't everyone do it?

- i. Spontaneous personalities tend to dislike the discipline that formal planning brings
- ii. We don't know how to go about the process
- iii. We fail to appreciate the need to manage differently when dealing with large organisations e.g. a family versus a boarding house versus a village
- iv. Dissatisfaction over plans that never get implemented
- v. Having seen plans forced on people without opportunity for input and discussion
- vi. Some people want to avoid the accountability that formal planning brings
- vii. Leaders can be fearful that seeking input will dilute their power or that the process of letting the team have input may lead to criticism
- viii. A fear that the planning process leads to less than ideal goals being chosen by consensus
- ix. We think it is ungodly

What does the Bible say about Strategy and Planning?

Every book of the Bible and every stage of God's saving history could be examined, but below are some important themes:

- i. The Scriptures reveal that God has plans, purposes and outcomes which He works to achieve. This is so fundamental to His revealed character that we cannot imagine a God who exists and acts with no ultimate purpose in mind. In creation and the new creation

God is working to a plan that is fixed for all eternity and his creatures are caught up in that plan.

- ii. The whole Bible with its promise-fulfilment structure reveals a God who works to a grand cosmic plan.
- iii. Ephesians chapters 1-3 is one crucial passage that applies the language of planning and purpose to the character and activity of God. God exercises His will, chooses, predestines, acts in accordance with His pleasure, makes known His will, has purposes in Christ, brings the times to fulfilment. He has a plan and works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will. His 'end game' is to sum up all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. He is ultimately seeking the praise of His glory through the exaltation of His Son and the good works of His people. God's mystery revealed to Paul is that the Gentiles with Israel will be united in one body in Christ. Therefore it is important our local plans and strategies reflect God's over-arching plan of glorifying Christ and the over-riding mission of making disciples.
- iv. It is not surprising then that the wisdom literature commends planning as built into the fabric of creation. It is God who establishes the plans of men (Prov 16:1,3,9; 19:21). Men cannot out-plan God (21:30). Our plans issue from our character (12:5; 14:22). It is wise to seek advice in making plans (15:22, 20:18). Diligence is required for plans to profit (21:5; cf. 6:6-11).
- v. Jesus lived and made decisions according to a divine plan and timetable. A quick glance through John's gospel confirms this. The prologue highlights Jesus purpose to reveal the one true God. He is the true light (1:9) and became flesh, dwelling among us, so that mankind can see the glory of the Father, making Him known (1:14-18). John the Baptist introduces Jesus' purpose as taking away the sin of the world (1:29). The theme of the 'hour' or 'time' points to the divine purpose to which Jesus submitted. The time of true worship in spirit and truth has come with Jesus (4:21-23). There is an end time of judgment for all which has now arrived in Jesus (5:25-30). Jesus' hour of glorification will be in his death and resurrection (12:23, 27; 17:1) and so any pre-emptive seizure of Jesus outside of this plan is prevented because His hour had not yet come (7:30, 8:20). His mother's expectation that Jesus would involve himself in the wine shortage in Cana is met with this same statement that his time has not yet come (2:4). Even the revelation of the Father to the disciples is according to a timetable (16:25,32).
- vi. The parables of Jesus in one sense are dealing with the issue of the apparent failure of His own ministry, a pattern which is to be anticipated in the future expansion of His kingdom. The seed of the Word is sown with a variety of responses from rejection to faith. Understanding and faith are a gift from God and faithlessness is the judgment of God. The parables themselves are instruments of this salvation and judgment (Matt 13:1-23). His parables unveil the surprising nature of His kingdom, unlike any other human empire, the children of the kingdom will only be revealed at the end, it appears to be weak and insignificant and yet is worth every effort to enter (Matt 13:24-52). Such teaching keeps us from measuring success in worldly terms of popularity and power.

- vii. The parables of 'the lost' in Luke 15 teach that 'numbers' can be important in our planning. Lost people matter to God and like Jesus we are to seek and to save each one. We should not be embarrassed to speak of numbers, because each numerical target represents individuals who need to know the Saviour.
- viii. The apostles are given a plan to fulfil by Christ on behalf of the Father. The commission statements set out this plan to preach Christ and so disciple the nations. There is to be a movement out geographically and ethnically from Judea to the world (Mt 28:16-20; Lk 24:45-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8).
- ix. Paul's missionary strategy is a huge subject which we can only touch upon here. For Paul his conversion and commission to the ministry could not be separated. The gospel had been entrusted to him (1 Tim 1:11-14; 2 Tim 1:11-12; Tit 1:3). His particular mission fulfils the prophetic word that salvation should come to the gentiles (Acts 13:46-48). Paul too is the suffering servant of the Messiah who effects his plan of saving the nations through the apostle.
- x. On several occasions Luke reveals the process and rationale for Paul's planning (Acts 13:1-3, 51; 14:1-3; 26-28; 16:6-10; 18:5-6; 19:21-22; 20:22-24). Paul has a deliberate strategy but God's sovereign intervention through His Spirit meant that his plans had to change. It is often opposition which shapes his plans. Paul's strategy is ultimately subordinate to his Lord's strategy.
- xi. We can trace some aspects of Paul's strategy. He goes to important population centres such as Philippi (16:12) and Ephesus (19:10). He extended the geographical frontiers of the gospel (16:9-10). He gives priority to strengthening established churches (14:21-23, 15:36, 41, 18:22-23, 19:10). He also does not work alone but in teams with junior partners whom he is evidently training.
- xii. Paul himself writes about his ministry plans. In 2 Corinthians 1-2 Paul is dealing with issues raised by his change of plans in visiting Corinth. Here he makes clear that his plans are governed by God's plan to fulfil all the prophetic promises in Christ, for His own glory (2 Cor 1:12-22). He is not making his plans 'according to the flesh' insincerely. In this case faithfulness involved a change of plans.
- xiii. Ministers of Christ in all generations are under the same commission and plan of God to preach Christ to the nations. Timothy, Titus and the overseers were entrusted with the same gospel and mission to speak this word. The overall plan and purpose of the minister is set out clearly. They are agents of God in fulfilling His plan (1 Tim 1:18-20; 3:2; 4:11-16; 6:20-21; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2;1-2; 4:1-2; Titus 1:7). The soldier, athlete and farmer are of necessity planners and diligent in implementing their goals.
- xiv. The description of the minister as a steward or manager implies the necessity of careful planning and implementation. Jesus uses the image of the manager to train his disciples in their mission. Not all disciples have the same responsibility, but to whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:41-48). Similarly the dishonest manager is surprisingly a model of faithfulness and reward (Luke 16:1-13).

Ministers then are stewards of the mysteries of God in the gospel and so are required to be faithful (1 Cor 4:1-2; 9:17). God has a plan which he is managing through the stewardship given to the apostle (Eph 1:10, 3:2,9; Col 1:25). All ministers, as overseers and shepherds, are stewards of God's grace in the word of the gospel (Tit 1:7; 1 Pet 4:10).

- xv. The language of 'building' used for Christian ministry and building Christ's church implies initiative and planning (1 Cor 12, Rom 12, Eph 4)
- xvi. The language of 'maturity' also indicates Paul has a 'growth' for the Church and individuals (Col 1:28-29; Eph 4:13-16).

This brief survey of the Scriptures certainly provides a theological basis for working toward an over-all purpose and mission. Also, Paul's mission strategy and planning is a model for more specific planning at the local ministry level.

Is Faithfulness Sufficient?

Evaluating Christian ministry is tricky. What is 'success'? Faithfulness to Christ and His word by living and preaching the gospel is fundamental, as seen from the image of being a 'steward'. Paul's letters to Corinth are often dealing with judgments made about his ministry in the context of other 'apostles' who are competing for the hearts and minds of the believers. His basic claim is that, although he is outwardly unimpressive, he has been faithful, building only on the foundation of Christ and that God will give the growth. Ultimately it is God's assessment that matters (1 Cor 1-4; 2 Cor 10-12). This faithfulness entailed preserving both true doctrine and pure motives.

However the apostle has clear goals in his ministry. He is very clear minded about what he is trying to accomplish and his basic strategy is to teach and apply the Word of God. From 1 Corinthians, these outcomes included:

- a. the unifying of the church in Corinth (1:10)
- b. the preaching of Jesus Christ crucified (2:2)
- c. the imitation of Paul himself and so of Christ (4:16; 11:1)
- d. the expulsion of the wicked from among them (5:13)

As we prayerfully minister the Word of God we will be seeking the progress of individuals and the congregation in particular aspects of doctrine and godly living. These are effectively qualitative goals.

Faithfulness includes Seeking to Achieve Ministry Expansion Goals?

'Faithfulness' can be misused as an evaluation of ministry if it 'lets us off the hook' in striving to see the gospel grow in its effects. Faithfulness also includes working to expand our ministries to reach new people and new territory. With appropriate humility in the light of God's sovereign grace, it is appropriate to have quantitative or territorial goals.

We are called to work for gospel expansion, given the commission of Christ to make disciples of all nations. Christ's kingdom will include people from every nation, tribe, language and people

(Rev 5:9-10; 14:6). Although Paul's case has unique features as the apostle to the Gentiles, his expansionary approach is a general model for ministry.

In Romans 15:14-33 Paul gives an overview of the 20 years of his missionary career. This includes a statement that the result of his work has been the geographical extension of the gospel 'from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum' (v. 19). His ambition was to 'to preach the gospel where Christ was not known', so that he would not be building on someone else's foundation. Now he plans to minister in Rome on his way to Spain (vv. 20-24)¹.

Peter O'Brien's summary is worth noting. "His journeys were purposeful, not sporadic, random skirmishes into gentile lands. Further, his geographical reference suggests that his ministry fell within the overlapping context of a universal gospel mission – the gospel itself had begun in Jerusalem when it was preached there by the first apostles. His claim to have 'fulfilled the gospel of Christ' is probably a reference to the scope of his missionary activity: it included primary evangelism, the nurture of Christians and the establishment of settled congregations. Paul is not suggesting that he has evangelised all the small towns and country districts of these eastern regions, much less that he had preached the gospel to every person there ... Paul's completing the gospel in key centres of the eastern Mediterranean was consistent with his all consuming passion of proclaiming the gospel where Christ had not been acknowledged or worshipped...Making it his aim to preach Christ in a pioneer situation was supported by the OT Scriptures."²

Paul is conscious of the geographical limits of the mission given him by God. His 'boasting' to defend his ministry to the Corinthians recognised that God had assigned to Paul and his colleagues a particular field that included them. He hoped that through them he would be able expand their activity to the regions beyond them. But Paul refused to 'boast' about work done in another man's territory (2 Cor 10:12-18).

In other places Paul refers to the expansionary nature of his ministry. He teaches everyone so that all will be perfect in Christ (Col 1:28). His ministry in Ephesus resulted in 'all the Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia' hearing the word of the Lord. His strategy was both public and household proclamation (Acts 19:10; 20:20). He worked to reach more and more people.

Are there Strategic Groups of People to Reach with the Gospel?

We are not called to preach to everyone, as that is impossible. We must be prepared to speak to anyone who will hear, but beyond that we can choose to whom we think we should go.

In this sense everyone is 'strategic' to reach with the gospel but some people or groups are strategic because through them others can be reached. This is a matter of wisdom and priority. We should reach parents because they are to teach children. Communities have cultural gatekeepers who shape the community's view of reality and values, so it might be a priority to reach them. Reaching immigrants in their adopted country might open up fields in their home country. Perhaps we should expend resources on groups more open to the gospel, but this cannot be an absolute strategy, for we do not know in whom God may be working for salvation.

What are the Dangers of Strategic Planning in Ministry?

- a. Arrogance: Only by God's will do we execute any plan or business (James 4:13-17)

- b. **Triumphalism:** It is right to make plans to preach Christ to all but the outcome is God's. He may choose to judge the hearers for their rebellion and harden their hearts. His ministers and the church may be seen as powerless and foolish rather than attractive and victorious. God reverses all human notions of establishing a kingdom. This is epitomised in the cross. (1 Cor 1-4; 2 Cor 10-12)
- c. **Loss of individual worth:** We must never lose sight of the individual, the little one who is welcomed by Christ (Mt 18:1-14). Thinking strategically about ministry never discounts the value of each person. However some ministries are strategic in the sense of training others who can reach more individuals.
- d. **Pragmatism:** We must not distort the gospel, making it more palatable, to achieve our goals. This is the essence of unfaithfulness (2 Cor 4; 2 Tim 4:3-5)
- e. **Activism:** We easily slip into thinking that by developing the right strategy and programmes and 'turning the handle', the results will come.
- f. **Ungodly motives:** Motives are important to God because He requires a pure heart. He knows our true motives and they will be exposed in the end (1 Cor 4:1-5). Goal setting can exacerbate the problem of ministering to please others. So we become some combination of proud, dishonest, and depressed.

Prayerlessness reveals that we have succumbed to these dangers. We stop praying regularly and earnestly for people and our ministries, tending to rely on our activity rather than God's and not dealing with ungodly motives. Paul's pattern of calling upon the churches to help him in his work by prayer, is a model for us (Rom 15:30ff; 2 Cor 11:1; Philip 1:19).

Endnotes

1 P.T. O'Brien, *Consumed by Passion* (Lancer, Homebush West:1993), 36-51. Several exegetical issues are discussed here, including the geographical scope of Paul's mission and what he means by saying that he has 'fully preached' the gospel of Christ.

2 O'Brien, 48-49