

## **What's your Theology of Strategic Planning?**

I was at a gathering of Christian Chief Executives, the Managing Director of a manufacturing company asked the question: "What's your theology of strategic planning?" I was a little embarrassed that being in Christian ministry it was not something I had thought about a great deal. At the time I was trying to work on a new strategic plan for the movement and was engaging in some consultation. I was looking for insights into where our strengths and weaknesses lay, how wider culture and the student world was evolving and what opportunities we should prioritise with our limited resources. The question "What is your theology of strategic planning?" seemed at first to feel like a step back rather than helping us move forward. Yet the more we considered the question, the more I realised it provided a framework for both a student mission and a manufacturing company.

Since that first conversation, I have returned to this question a number of times. We know that all truth is God's truth and that human beings are made in the image of God. There are things we can learn about God's power and nature from His creation but we also know from His word that there are things that His people are called to do differently from the world around. We are called to be a counter culture rather than a copy culture so the way we do leadership, use money, conduct relationships and consider the future must follow a different pattern. I believe it is both appropriate and necessary that God's people engage in strategic planning, but we need to do it differently. This difference comes because we see everything through the lens of faith and because we are the people of God engaged in the mission of God, to the glory of God.

Recently as part of the IFES Strategic Planning I have been considering some of our theology of strategic planning. What follows is not offered as a "how to", rather it is some thoughts that seek to put the process in a Biblical framework and raise some questions for further reflection.

### **1. God reveals himself as one who plans.**

Creation is planned and carried out over a timeline constructed during the unfolding process. God works through plans which He reveals to His people in history. Sometimes these plans have an immediate horizon sometimes they work and wait through multiple generations. Sometimes God's people are called to obedience not knowing what lies ahead. Abraham is called to leave the land of Ur and to go to the land that God will show him. He is called to move away from all that has given him security and identity and step into the unknown. On other occasions God makes promises and covenants that give a clear indication of what He plans and purposes for the future, the promise of land, of fruitfulness of blessing, of a Saviour, of return from exile, of redemption, of resurrection, of Christ's return and of final judgement.

Sometimes in the Bible we see God working through sinful human beings with impure motives to accomplish His plans. When Joseph is talking to his brothers after they have been reunited he explains to them God was at work even through their desire for revenge: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Genesis 50 v 20). Joseph develops a plan to save grain during the seven years of plenty to provide during the coming seven years of famine. During most of those years, he was planning for the benefit of Pharaoh, only later did he come to appreciate that this was part of God's bigger picture. God's plans are breath taking. Glimpsing even a small part of them and appreciating our part in them should lead to worship. Ultimately, God's plan inevitably leads to a people from everywhere who will worship Him forever.

We see this concern to deepen the devotion of His people and grow their faith when Jeremiah writes to the exiles in Babylon;

This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (Jeremiah 29 v 10-14)

These are remarkable verses. Having already laid out the strategy for the immediate future; to build, plant, marry, increase in number and seek the welfare of Babylon going against both the prophecies they are hearing and their personal feelings. God reveals a seventy year plan which will lead to their return from exile. God's sovereignty, through history, is once more on display and the end result is clearly stated. God's plan is that the people will grow in their devotion to God and their dependence on him.

This purpose is worked out through the history of the world and God's dealing with His people. We see a coherence to God's plan leading through the history of Israel, the law and the prophets to the coming of Jesus, His death, resurrection, ascension and promised return and the commission to the early church to take the good news to the ends of the earth.

Paul writing to the Ephesians gives an even wider angle on God's plans and purposes in Jesus. Speaking about God choosing us before the foundation of the world and underlining the significance of what has happened in Christ and what is promised to happen at the end of time.

""In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace [8] that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment---to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." (Ephesians 1 v 7-10)

We see the grace of God advancing a plan conceived long ago, centred on the cross and looking to the future. This past, present and future dimension helps the church in Ephesus to remember what God has done for them in the past and their future destiny which frames their identity and activity.

We are part of this story. God's purpose is plain from his word and our challenge is to discover His plan and our part in it.

Reflection 1:

To what extent is the motivation in our strategic planning seeking to glorify God?  
What do we value in our history, as a faith community that shapes our identity?

## **2. Strategic Planning is rooted in our relationship with God in this moment.**

In IFES we believe in the sovereignty of God in creation, revelation, redemption and final judgement and in the supreme authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and conduct. So we understand that there are many things in the world that have the fingerprints of the Creator all over them but this general revelation needs to be subject to the specific revelation of Scripture. This is obvious but it is surprisingly easy to put aside doctrinal considerations in strategic planning rather than seeing them as foundational. The board and the leadership of a national movement need to make sure that they continue to place real value on their Basis of Belief since this is the foundation of our ministry, the basis of our unity and a key component of our identity. A strategic plan will express our identity at a particular point in history but it does not in and of itself describe or determine who we are. We are involved in God's work for God's glory and whatever plans we make need to embody this. More than that our strategic planning process must be grounded in prayer. Anyone can imagine a set of bold objectives and targets and a process of how these might be achieved but plans that flow from our own ideas are very different from plans that come from God.

I believe that a fresh encounter with God is crucial in understanding what God is doing at a particular point in history and what part we are called to play in that. Discerning what is happening in the world through the lens of what God might be doing next, is an important part of the strategic thinking process.

Isaiah's call takes place "In the year that King Uzziah died". At this pivotal leadership transition he has a surprising and dramatic revelation of the Lord and out of this flows his response to God's call. When Peter experiences the miraculous catch of fish, his response is "Get away from me Lord, I am a sinful man". Like Isaiah before him, this appreciation of the holiness of God leads to a new call, "Come with me and I will make you a fisher of men".

These calls both take place at a time when God is doing a new thing but the response is not in response to this plan it is to God himself. Without this encounter with the Lord we are not going to engage staff, volunteers and students with our strategies, goals and activities. Our planning needs to be guided by vision more than an awareness of need or a sense of opportunity. This vision comes from encountering the Holy Spirit and understanding what God is saying in our cultural moment.

The men of Issachar had the reputation of understanding the times and knowing what to do. We are not told how they were able to do this, but my assumption is that this ability came from God. It would be hard to find a better summary of the heart of strategic planning. Knowing God and our context and understanding how we should respond is not something we can achieve without Him.

Prayer is not something which we do before or after strategic planning it is an integral part of the process. Similarly engaging with God's word is foundational to any strategic planning.

As national movements we need boards, staff teams and student leaders who will seek God's face as well as God's hand.

Reflection 2:

Is our strategic planning surrounded by prayer so we can discern our context and respond appropriately?

How do we ensure that Scripture and encountering God in his word are integral to our strategic thinking?

How do we understand what is changing in the world and the opportunities and risks this presents?

### **3. Strategic Planning will advance God's overall mission.**

In what has become known as The Great Commission Jesus lays out His plan to the disciples. In response to His divinely given authority, they are appointed to go and make disciples. The scope of this is everywhere and everything. Jesus is explicit that it includes all nations and that as well as baptising in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit they are to teach everything that Jesus has taught them. It concludes with the promise that the One who is sending them is going with them. Jesus does not give the disciples a program to implement this vision, and it would not pass the threshold for SMART goals often referenced today. The key learnings I take from this are that we must always lead with vision and remember that the Lord goes with us. Unless the Lord builds the house, we labour in vain. While setting goals and targets can be tremendously helpful, they can also constrain our vision and grow an organisational culture that values outcomes more than outputs. An outcome is primarily about a bigger picture purpose, looks through a lens of impact and measures quality. An output is primarily around reaching a target, looks through the lens of achievement and measures quantity. It is clear in Scripture that God is concerned both with increasing the size of His people and deepening their faith and love for Him. We need strategic plans which grow both the quantity and the quality of our work and to develop ways of measuring both.

God's bigger picture purpose is usually advanced by small pieces that contribute to the whole.

When Nehemiah hears about the state of Jerusalem it moves him to prayer where he brings the current situation before God but reflects on the wider arc of God's character and work through history. As he determines to return to rebuild the walls he makes a succession of plans starting with his requests to the king for safe passage and supplies, his secret reconnoitring of the situation and his formulation of plans to begin work, to defend from opposition and to finish the task. Each of these plans is part of a bigger picture mission to rebuild the city to the glory of God.

Jesus three year public ministry had many components; calling disciples, announcing the Kingdom, teaching, healing, helping and encouraging. These elements are all part of a planned destiny that leads to the cross and resurrection.

The early church is commissioned to continue the advancement of God's Kingdom. In Acts 6 a crisis develops that threatens to distract the apostles from their primary calling to preach and teach. There is a dispute over the fair distribution of food between Hebraic and Hellenistic widows in the community. It is an important issue to resolve but creates a conflict for the apostles between responding to this need and continuing the ministry of the word of God. They propose a plan which enables the widows to be cared for while the ministry of word and prayer advances.

"Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism." (Acts 6 v 3-5)

It is interesting that they make this proposal to the whole group. They delegate the choosing of the seven and clearly state that responsibility will be devolved to them. This plan meets with approval and seven people are identified and commissioned to make it a reality. A result of this is a rapid increase in the number of disciples including many priests as God's word spreads.

One of the challenges in leading an IFES movement is being clear about our calling and our priorities when there are so many important things that we could be doing. Partnership is often a key component of strategic planning. Our contexts vary around the world but these potential partners include Christian professors, church leaders, other mission agencies, chaplains, graduates, other IFES movements, Regional teams and Global initiatives. We need to be clear about our vision and values but collaborating with others where there is shared vision and ministry philosophy and finding common ground where there is mutual theological convictions and complimentary activity.

InterVarsity in Canada has five core aims; Evangelism, Discipleship, Christian Thinking, World Mission and Leadership Development. We express these historical objectives in language that resonates today; Discover Jesus, Undivided Life, Engaged Thinking, Global Vision and Growing Influence. It is these wider objectives that give underpin our strategic planning. Our specific plans and outcomes relate to furthering our mission and advancing our aims.

The specific plans that we see through the Bible are all part of a bigger plan. The individual stories can sometimes be very detailed and other times there appears to be more latitude given. Invariably, though the big idea is made clear and the plan is quite simple. Leaders orientate the people to what is going on and what is required of them.

Sir Peter Blake was an accomplished sailor and a well respected leader. He led team New Zealand to Americas Cup victories in 1995 and 2000. Competing against teams with much greater resources he adopted a simple strategy. Every suggestion, alteration or choice was evaluated against a single criteria; "Will it make the boat go faster?" This simple question motivated the team to be clear about how their contribution contributed to the progress of the purpose of the yacht.

Many of the best strategic plans that I have seen have been captured on a single piece of paper. I believe board members, staff and student leaders should be able to give a two minute summary of who we are, where we are going and what our part in it is.

This does not mean that there is no value in budgets, systems or processes. These things are all part of a healthy, functioning organisation. But if we are to have significant impact these things need to serve and advance the mission and further our aims.

### Reflection 3:

How does the plan we are considering for our movement, fit within God's bigger plan?

Who could we partner with to translate our ideas into action?

What is progress going to look like in terms of outcomes and outputs?

What is your two minute summary of why the movement exists, what is the next thing God is doing and what is your part in it?

#### **4. God's ways do not always follow human wisdom.**

God constantly works in unusual ways so that it is clear that it is God who is making it happen. The Bible is absolutely brimming with examples of God working in counter cultural ways. Marching round the walls blowing trumpets is not the conventional way to capture a city; drastically reducing the size of your army is not the most common way to prepare for battle; picking unschooled fishermen to proclaim the gospel and debate religious leaders would not be the obvious selection. If you were sending out a mission team in pairs you might expect them to take essential supplies for the journey. A public execution reserved for criminals would not be the most respectable means of furthering God's plan of salvation. In the First Century, women would not be put forward as credible witnesses in a court case let alone to give first testimony to Jesus resurrection. Student leaders would not be everyone's choice to be entrusted with the mission to share the good news and make disciples on campus. But "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are." (1 Cor 1 v 27-28).

In all the cases above there is a strategy and a plan but although these come from God, they are implemented by His people. People of faith are the principle asset by which the plans and purposes of God are advanced. Our strategic thinking needs to account for investment in the people who will implement our plan.

We need to beware of dismissing things that look small, unconventional or radical without considering if they come from God. In our desire for consistency and order we need to leave space for some messiness and change.

As Proverbs expresses: "Lean not on your own understanding, don't trust in the things you think you know, but in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths". (Proverbs 3 v 5-6).

We all have blind spots, that determine what we value, who we listen to and why we advance particular priorities. Scripture and history clearly show that God works in surprising and extraordinary ways. This does not, of course, mean that we disregard all human wisdom. Many of the examples Jesus and Paul use draw lessons from everyday life. Builders, athletes, soldiers, farmers all follow recognised procedures. Jesus asks: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish it'" (Luke 14 v 28 – 30). We need to make plans but we need to do so with good minds, strong hearts and clear vision. But as we look through the lens of faith we need to be sensitive to the leading of the spirit. As Zerubbabel is reminded by the Lord "it is not by might nor by power but by my spirit" (Zechariah 4 v 6).

Within this arc of God's promise and provision many different characters and personalities are called to play their part.

In the story of IFES, we have consistently valued wisdom, experience, perspective and sound judgement. These qualities are vital for doctrinal integrity, organisational development, effective governance and sound financial management. But we have also consistently seen the fruit of promoting creative people, encouraging the risk takers, resourcing the innovators, empowering younger leaders and making space for God to call something new into being. Combining these perspectives can bring tensions that have sometimes taken us beyond our organisational comfort zone but often that is where faith has grown and mission has prospered.

One of the most encouraging aspects of the Breaking New Ground initiative has been young leaders stepping out in faith to pioneer work in new cities and countries. In many cases they have been supported, encouraged and trusted by more experienced leaders. This is how it should be. IFES movements flourish through inter generational partnerships.

#### Reflection 4:

Who can moderate our discussions so that the voices of experience and innovation are both heard and contribute to a vision for growth?

What are our strengths and opportunities?

How are we being called to step out in faith and do a new thing?

### **5. Our plans do not always work out as planned.**

We are introduced to Joseph as a young man with big dreams. We follow his story through betrayal, enslavement, exile, promotion to foreman, false accusation, unjust imprisonment, royal appointment and leader of hope. In his role as First Minister of Egypt Joseph has a vision of the future that comes from God in a dream to Pharaoh. His mission is to save the people from a coming famine. His strategic framework is to put grain aside during the seven years of plenty so that there are reserves to see them through the seven years of famine. It transpires that not only is this part of God's plan for Joseph but also of His purposes for the people of Israel. When the opportunity presents itself Joseph adapts and develops new strategies that enable him to act as an agent of reconciliation in his family and the people of Israel. Through all the ups and downs Joseph comes to see the sovereign hand of God at work. Towards the end of his life, he reassures his brothers saying : "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50 v 20)

We know that God rules and overrules, working all things together for good for those who love Him.

The persecution of the early church that saw many leave Jerusalem after Stephen was martyred became the impetus by which the Gospel spread to Judea and Samaria. Jesus had made clear that geographical growth was part of his purpose but it was suffering that made it a reality.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul states that he has planned to come to see them many times but has been prevented from doing so. The gospel eventually crosses into Europe when Paul and his companions are unable to follow through on their plans and have a vision of a man from Macedonia. This gives rise to a whole new missionary endeavour beyond what they had planned at the start of their journey. Paul's mission is to take the Good News of Jesus to the Gentiles. His strategic framework is to take small mission teams on journeys where they will often preach in synagogues and plant churches. They often experience opposition and find themselves speaking in a wide variety of contexts to a great variety of people with whom they are always ready to share the good news. He also has a strategy of letter writing where this remote or virtual ministry complements and supports his physical ministry. In crossing into Macedonia, they were still following the same call and using the same strategy but were now doing it in a new way in a new place. This required adapting to a different culture. We need to hold our plans lightly and be willing to adapt and respond.

Paul arrived in Athens ahead of the rest of the mission team but spent the time listening and learning about the culture. He is able to identify some bridgeheads. For the gospel which shapes his message on the Areopagus. He is clear about his mission but adapts his message to his new context.

Our faithfulness to God and His call, will determine the health of our ministry more than our adherence to a strategic plan.

The IFES work in Jamaica started when the plane carrying Stacey Woods, IFES first General Secretary, had to be repaired on the island. Stacey took the opportunity to explore possibilities in high schools and universities and in a few days had met some people who together formed a vision to start a ministry. On returning to Canada he approached Cathie Nicholl, one of the InterVarsity staff to go and help pioneer the emerging student mission. She went for three months to develop High School work and four years later returned to support the launch of university work.

God involves us in His plans and I believe it is appropriate for a movement to think strategically and creatively as it faces the future. This framework can help us communicate with supporters, engage student leaders and staff and allocate resources appropriately. It will enable us to be agile and responsive.

One of the things we learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic is the importance of recognising the need to be flexible and to discover new ways of doing things in a changing context. The world is changing all the time and we need to be able to adjust our strategy. If we are clear on our mission, our vision and our values we will be better prepared and equipped to make adjustments.

Reflection 5:

What are our clearly identified top priorities?

What is our strategic framework for developing ways of working that advance these priorities?

How do we make sure that our strategy is clear on vision and values but leaves space to adapt structures and programs?

We have a rich heritage in IFES. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. Their faith and foresight have laid our foundations. Our calling is to build in our generation and to add to that legacy. It is a huge privilege to be involved in developing strategic plans. We never do this alone but it is even better when we do it together.

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