

Thinking theologically about strategy

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The starting point in any strategic planning process is the recognition that because God is the main character in the bible, before asking "what is our strategy" we must first ask "what is God doing in His world, and how might we participate in HIS plans?" Dr Christopher Wright helpfully reminds us of the amazing privilege we have of joining in "the Mission of God"!

The bible portrays God's mission in a variety of ways, all with delightful nuance: to bring all things to unity in Christ (Eph 1:10); to see every knee bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Php 2:9-11); for Jesus to "build his church and the gates of Hades not overcome it" (Mt 16:18); for Christ's disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:18). Each describe the incredible blessing of belonging to the greatest movement our world has ever seen - one which cannot fail - because it is guaranteed by Christ's death and resurrection.

Consequently, although the bible commends intentionality in ministry (Paul describes his strategies in Romans 15 for taking the gospel to unreached peoples, and for collecting financial offerings to support churches in need), it's critical to remember that our initiatives are always provisional, and subject to the proviso "if the Lord wills it" (Jas 4:15). Ultimately, God's mission will succeed because it's backed by God, not by the rigour of our strategy!

Nevertheless, the bible highlights the great privilege in serving the living God, with the promise of being honoured by our master for our service (Lk 19:17), and the importance of being wise stewards of limited resources (eg Lk 16:1-9). How wonderful that God has used student work to influence more than just the campuses on which IFES ministers; but we must never presume our ministry is "indispensable" to God's plan for His world. Nothing - neither our apparent successes, nor our unintended failure - will ever stop God from exalting His Son forever and ever!

That means we ought balance on the one hand trusting that "it's all up to God", and on the other hand recognizing that "better strategy usually leads to better outcomes". Both are true, for without both truths we will end up thinking either that we have no real role to play in God's plans, or that we are the ones who give growth! Perhaps the most important implication therefore is to be self-aware: which of these extremes do we tend towards, and what would help us have a more balanced perspective?

After that we can ask, "how do our theological convictions shape our strategic thinking?" Here are 3 initial suggestions, along with some discussion and reflection questions to get us started ...

1. Always begin with prayer: we must begin by listening to God's voice, because this is HIS overall mission, and we'd never want to operate at cross-purposes to His plans, or be guilty of mis-representing Him! And so we ought pray individually, collectively and globally before we rush head-long into our next project (as is often the tendency of activists!), calling on Him to help us recall our own history so we might see how He has already used us so graciously for the praise of His glory. Prayer is not a burden to discharge but an expression of our dependency on Him, and His wonderful gift to stop us under-thinking or over-thinking matters, or worrying that God's mission is somehow "up to us"!

2. Meditate constantly and deeply on Scripture: God speaks to us primarily through His Word, and so we believe in "the supreme authority of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and conduct" (IFES Doctrinal Basis Pt 1). God's Word is the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17) to shape us according to HIS character and concerns, not just our own (or the worlds' around us). This is critical if we are joining in GOD'S mission, not trying to establish our own!

3. Listen graciously to the people of God: God is calling to Himself believers from every nation, tribe, language and tongue, which means we belong to a truly global initiative (not just a uniquely individual one). And so as we move from prayer and Scriptural meditation to action, we recognize that God guides us through the collective wisdom of His entire people discerned across time and space. That has at least 3 significant implications:

- i. we must be willing to change our strategy if the Holy Spirit directs (eg Paul in Acts 16:10); and we would do well to speak of our "longings and desires" rather than our "plans" (which can come across as inflexible)
- ii. others must always be free to disagree with our suggestions and act on different desires (we should be wary of justifying our decisions by saying "God told me", because it will be hard for others to choose a different direction in response)
- iii. we ought learn from others so we don't "reinvent the wheel" - without blindly replicating their strategy, since our local context always varies (the growth in "Ministry Best Practices" can subtly imply that there is only one "right" way to do ministry)

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At the end of the day, the primary way we participate in God's mission is by longing for "HIS name to be hallowed, HIS kingdom to come, HIS will to be done on earth as in heaven". Our great God WILL glorify His name, so let's call on Him to continue to use IFES until the earth is filled with the glory of God (as the waters cover the sea).

For reflection and discussion:

1. "Success is entirely in God's hands" versus "it all depends on me": which of these two extremes do you tend towards, and what might help you maintain a more balanced approach?
2. With whom might you join in prayer, asking God to guide IFES through this process? What will you pray for, and why?
3. What might help you better engage with Scripture? What particular training would benefit (eg understanding how different parts of Scripture speak more or less directly to our current situation, given where we are in God's unfolding mission?)
4. Which is your default tendency: simply to follow others, or stubbornly insist on "going it alone"? What heart change might help you to better hear to the collective wisdom of the people of God?