



A Biblical plan for ministry

Long range planning

If you've ever been a member of a Board of Directors for a Christian charitable organization, you know the term "Long Range Planning Committee." It's the one committee hardly anyone volunteers to be on. Long range planning is difficult work, requires visionary minds and a big picture perspective that few today seem to have. We're typically better at dealing with immediate issues and problems, not anticipating issues expected to arise in the next 5 or 10 years.

Many Reformed and Presbyterian churches shy away from long range planning. When I speak with church leaders, I hear statements like these: "Jesus never did a ministry plan. Why should we?" or "I don't read about any apostolic planning sessions in the book of Acts. We should just follow the Bible. Its got enough in it." Or the real kicker, "Calvin never had a long range plan for Geneva. He just preached!"

Aside from the humor, such comments reflect a shallow understanding of Scripture, and an even shallower understanding of the mission of the church. In this article, I want to build a case for long range planning for the local church, and invite elders and deacons to think seriously about instituting such planning meetings for their congregation.

Is it Biblical?

If you listen to the nay-sayers, you'd think that long range planning is a breach of faith, fails to trust the Lord, and reflects a worldly attitude toward the work of the church. But that simply isn't true.

Consider just a couple of passages from the Gospels and Acts (I could cite many). John 14-16 present to us Jesus' "farewell discourse," in which He prophesies His own death and subsequent "going away" by way of the ascension. He then spends a great amount of time detailing, with divine foresight, the obstacles the disciples will face in their ministry (hatred, persecution), promises the Holy Spirit to be the "counselor," and challenges the disciples to a ministry that is very carefully planned: preach, endure, withstand opposition, and through it all, bear fruit.

Or consider the book of Acts. Chapter 6 describes a circumstance in which a crisis has occurred, a crisis caused by enormous growth and the strain of that growth on the Jerusalem church. With God-given wisdom, the apostles appoint deacons to manage the resources of the church, assigning themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (v. 4). You might counter by saying, "That's not a long range plan, that's an adjustment." But I beg to differ. How many of our churches would be willing to significantly rearrange the responsibilities of deacons or other staff members so that pastoral elders were able to do nothing but focus on prayer and the ministering of the Word? To make that kind of shift requires a serious long range plan based on God's assignment of duties.

Consider Acts 15, the so-called "Jerusalem Synod." In it we hear Paul and Barnabus retelling the marvelous story of the Gentiles' conversion. And we witness the early church discussing priorities. Not priorities of time management, mind you, but priorities of doctrines! "What is it that we will require of converts? What's the entry level demands, as opposed to the goals of long term disciples who are mature in the Lord?" That requires a plan of action, an initial declaration over against a long term goal. And when the apostles and other disciples had prayed and discussed, they concluded:

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from

the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things."

Finally, take Acts 20. In the passage that I've quoted extensively, we read Paul, on his way to Rome, bidding farewell to the Ephesian elders. In that farewell, he sets forth the long range plan for their work, including the establishment of their priorities. *First*, watch over yourselves because you're not immune to the devil's assault. *Second*, watch over the flock, precious in God's eyes, because the devil will assault the flock both from without and from within, especially using a distortion of the truth as their weapon. To do the above, stay in the Word, which will build you up and give you an inheritance. *Finally*, send me (Paul) on my way; you have work to do and so do I. You're on your own, without me, but always with the help of the Spirit!

Not quite the same?

Granted, such Biblical "mission plans" are not quite as detailed as are, say, the mission statements, goals, and vision plans drafted by many of today's churches. Indeed, some church's mission plans resemble a business plan so thoroughly that they seem to depend exclusively on planning and performance and never on the Holy Spirit and prayer!

But that's not what I'm calling for. I'm asking you all to look carefully at your ministries and adapt your energies and efforts in the Lord's service to the target and the opportunities God has provided you. Every Biblical ministry plan has similar components. *First*, an honest assessment of your immediate situation. For example, the spiritual forces affecting your people might include unbridled materialism, or children who are not making commitments to Christ when they mature, or a serious problem with sexual ethics among the singles. Also, assess your community. Is it old? Young? Drop-out evangelicals who went to Sunday School as kids, but haven't been back since? Strong Jewish or Muslim community? Internationals? Lots of cultural diversity? A powerful anti-Christian gay movement, or despair among youth reminiscent of Columbine HS in Colorado? How you plan to do evangelism is profoundly affected by whom you are trying to reach!

Second, take the pulse of your congregation. Do your people love the Lord? How do you know? Read their Bibles with delight (the devil knows doctrine, but doesn't delight in it!)? Pray both in public and in secret (not for show!)? Evangelize (not just talk, but actually testify!)? Demonstrate radical and personal transformation of life in service to Christ (true conversion!)? Faithful in glad and earnest worship (understanding that unbelievers have habits too)? Generous in giving (knowing that some try to buy their way into salvation)?

How about physical resources? Is your building sufficient? Take a tour, as if you had never been in a church before (literally walk through with that in mind). Ask yourself whether you are user friendly. Whether you have sufficient Bibles, song books, parking spaces. Whether a newcomer could figure out easily where the nursery or rest rooms are. How about the worship service itself? Does your bulletin serve to help, or does it contain so much "insider information" that no one but a long term member would be able to figure it out without a translator?

Then *third*, match your resources with your mandate. Perhaps you'll have to call another pastor, or hire someone to assist your ministry who has gifts your congregation doesn't have. Perhaps you'll have to reorganize your committee structure to better utilise the gifts you have, unleashing your people for ministry without micromanaging them to death. Maybe you'll have to provide a lot more encouragement because many of your people are burned out from years of service with no evident fruit. Maybe you'll have to "fire" some people who are mismatched with their gifts and their job. (A long time SS teacher who can't teach is probably turning off a generation of kids, even if he/she is well meant!)

Here are a couple examples of such planning.

For example: Is your church located in an inner city, surrounded by a "pentecost" of languages, cultures, and races? Great! What are you doing to make sure your congregation reflects that diversity and reaches all kinds of people? If you're trying to cling to a certain ethnic and economic

identity, you aren't loving your immediate neighbors with the gospel of Christ. More to the point, even if you recognize your calling and opportunity, if you've been ethnically and culturally monolithic for a long time, you'll need a radical and careful plan to allocate resources in such a way as to begin the transformation. (Much like Acts 6!) You may have to hire someone from a radically different racial or cultural background to reach people that you would not ordinarily reach.

Are you a commuter congregation (like the one I serve), where members drive up to 55 miles one way to church? Your plan of ministry must take that distance into account, perhaps in several ways. Maybe you'll have to "deliver" Bible Studies to the congregation, instead of assuming that all ministry will take place at the church building site. Perhaps you'll have to think about using email and the internet for some things that don't necessarily require person to person contact. But to do any or all of these things will require thoughtful and careful planning, the wise allocation of limited resources (ours are limited; God's are limitless!), and a common commitment by the elders, the deacons, and the congregation.

Why now? Why would I encourage you to think about ministry plans now, in the middle of the Fall when this article is printed?

First, because it's never too late to become good stewards of our ministry resources. *Second*, because many elders' boards wisely spend some time in a planning and prayer retreat sometime around the first of the year. Perhaps this article might stimulate a bit of an agenda for that retreat. *Finally*, because a failure to plan is, as the old rubric goes, a plan to fail.

The seriousness of our mission before God demands nothing less than the best, both of planning that is consistent with the Word of God, and of obedient commitment to that Word and the mandate it sets forth.

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