

**Designing for the Unknown:
Preparing The Church To Meet The Yet-To-Emerge Future**



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When Moses asked God for His name, God said, "I AM WHO I AM..."¹ The "I AM" name God revealed to Moses represents the timeless nature of God – the past, present, and future simultaneously; to God the present includes the past and the future. Throughout Scripture we can see that God used the knowledge and experience of the past, coupled with His revelation about the future to be the driving force and guide for His church.

Holding firm to God's unchanging values and unchanging Word, the contemporary church must continually push against the temptation to view only the present rather than to examine a larger and uncharted view of the future. Since the world constantly changes,² we must continually redesign the organization of our ministries and strategies, not just for the known emerging future, but for the unknown future yet to emerge. To successfully leverage the challenges and opportunities of the future, God's church must lift its vision beyond what we see coming to become students of the future.

Scripture Teaches Us to Look for the Future Yet to Emerge

Scripture compels us to examine a future far beyond our immediate foreseeable world. For example, the Old Testament prophets foretold the coming Day of the Lord.³ The prophets predicted the exile of the Jews to Assyria⁴ and Babylon.⁵ They also prophesied the coming of Christ⁶ and other future events.

The New Testament continues to provide God's message to look for emerging events. For example, Jesus warned His followers that they would face the same hostility from the world as He had⁷ and He gave them the promise of the coming Holy Spirit.⁸ Jesus also promised that He would return for the believers to take them with Him to Heaven.⁹

As Jesus conversed with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, His disciples asked him what would be the signs of His Coming and the end of the age.¹⁰ In response, Jesus vividly poured out detail after detail of the momentous events to come. He instructed them to study the trends in their world to identify and prepare for His predicted future. Through Scripture, He still exhorts His people to study trends in the emerging world to prepare for their future.

The Emerging World

In the past, emerging events developed slowly – slow enough for organizations to redesign themselves to keep up with the changes. According to Daniel Wren, with the slow change during the agricultural era, societies changed so slightly there was no pressure for organizations to

consider planning for a different future.¹¹ Organizations such as churches designed themselves only to meet the needs of their community as it was. In the industrial era, as the design of more mechanistic models replaced the agrarian models, people began to adapt to increasing change within the culture.¹² Organizations began to pay attention to changes as they emerged and to make regular necessary adaptive design adjustments, but they were still able to keep up with the change.

Now in the genesis of the digital age, emerging events develop rapidly and yet organizational redesign still takes a long time. By the time an organization recognizes the need to redesign and then struggles through the time it takes to change the organization, the recognized need has faded and a new need has surfaced. The organization then faces a new emerging need with an outdated design.¹³ It is becoming increasingly difficult to redesign an organization fast enough.

For example, now we communicate with people almost anywhere in the world as if they were next door. With the availability of instant world news from around the globe, we are becoming a world community. The day is gone when an organization must cluster its offices into one building; now an organization scatters its workforce around the community, country, or even the world and still maintains constant communication. These changes are just the tip of the iceberg. According to Rex Miller, each innovation results in more and faster change which in turn continues to accelerate more change.¹⁴ We must rethink the design process for our organizations to continuously accommodate what we know as well as what we do not yet know.

“What We Do Not Know”

Stan Davis asked an executive what concerned him most about the future; the answer was, “What we do not know that we do not know.”¹⁵ Many people do not know what they do not know. They live detached from the world beyond their immediate personal experience. We could call this group of people “adaptive” – they just adapt to what comes. According to Eric Garland, not looking at the future opens the door to the possibility of holding wrong assumptions about the future.¹⁶

Some “know they do not know” and have a need to know, so they strive to learn about driving forces which are likely to emerge. This group examines what they see emerging today, but they also research trends to anticipate the unseen forces that will likely emerge in the future. This group tests their own assumptions about the future to protect the design process from wrong assumptions. We could call this group of people “students of the future.”¹⁷

Others think they “know” but don’t realize how little they know. This group has no curiosity about the future and believes all their assumptions are correct. Some may recognize that the world is changing and occasionally look for specific information of personal interest about future events. We could call this group of people “dangerous” because they have enough information to be overconfident about their assumptions and knowledge, but not enough information to make sound observations and inferences or to correctly design for the emerging future.

Designing for the Emerging Future

God gave us the capability to design for the emerging future; He gave us a systemic-cybernetic mind. Our mind is systemic in that it operates within itself and with our body as a neurological system. Our mind is also cybernetic in that the mind receives information about our environment and automatically changes our body to adapt – such as perspiring to cool ourselves.

The mind also has the capability of processing information that has future implications.¹⁸ For example, perhaps you are driving a vehicle and approaching a bridge. The river flowing under the bridge is at flood stage, yet still several feet below the bridge. Your mind processes what you see, recalls what you learned in the past and forecasts that the bridge is likely to fail while you cross it. You hesitate and decide to listen to your intuition. As you watch, you see the bridge torn apart by the water, yet you are still alive and well.

God structured our brains to receive input,¹⁹ to reflect on it,²⁰ to personalize it to our needs,²¹ and then to act on the processed information.²² The brain can only process the information it has; it receives information from incidental input from the five senses or from the intentional input of information we gather. Given the rapidness of change today, we must intentionally research for information to input into our brain that will help us design for an emerging future. In other words, God prepared our brains so we can be effective students of the future and redesigners of our organizations.

Redesigning Your Organization

What does this mean for you today? God called you and prepared you for His exciting emerging future. Although we may not know the specifics of the coming world changes, we do know the final outcome of God's plans – eternity with Him. Your goal is to design an organization (such as your church) to be an effective organization to reach as many people for Christ as possible. Culturally and socially the people God calls you to reach are often different from you. The coming changes will produce generations who will be living in a world very different from ours today.²³ Yet God's commission is not generation specific; He has called you to reach all your contemporary generations, including many who will think differently from you. What will you do?

You may be one of the "adaptive" groups that for some reason are unaware of the changes going on around you or you may be one of the "dangerous" groups with overconfidence. In both instances, you may simply keep on with your existing ministry design or you may redesign a new approach but miss the target. Unfortunately, those who do not relate to your approach may reject the opportunity for eternity.

You may be one of the students of the future who desire to prepare yourself to maximize your effectiveness for Christ by understanding the audience you will evangelize and disciple. You desire to design a process better able to create ministry methods which will be on target with those to whom you will be ministering.

How do you prepare? Research for information about the future, look around you and observe trends, analyze your information and relate it what it means to God's church, and discuss your results with other Christians.²⁴

Jacqueline Faulhaber provides five considerations to understand when designing into the future:²⁵

1. Consider that the future may not be the same as today or the past.²⁶ Yesterday's design may not be the most productive in tomorrow's organizations.

2. Consider that both the past and the future are driving forces for today's design decisions.²⁷ The unchanging Word of God and His promises for the future must be stirred in the crucible of the emerging world as we redesign our currently existing organizations.

3. Consider that likely scenarios for the future can be categorized as "possible, probable and [or] preferable."²⁸ In examining possible future scenarios for our organization, we don't have to settle for "possible" or "probable." We need to make design decisions which will produce "preferable" outcomes from the range of possibilities.

4. Consider the difference between the present situation and where you determine you need to be.²⁹ Once you realize the gap between your present organization and your preferable future, you can begin designing an organization to bridge the gap and move confidently into the future.

5. Consider how to redesign to prepare for where you determine you want to be. Faulhaber suggests visualizing your organization in the future, then designing step-by-step a plan to reach your goal.³⁰

Some may try to discourage you from the ominous task of future research, but remember that designing your ministry with a "blurry vision" will be more on target than designing your ministry based on no vision.³¹ Become a student of the future, get the information, and trust that God will use the information and you to continually redesign His church to enable you to "go and make disciples" in your emerging future.

NOTES

1 Exodus 3:13-14 NAS (New American Standard).

2 David M. Walker, "Foresight for Government," *The Futurist*, March/April 2007, 19.

3 Isa. 2:10-22; 13:6, 9; Joel 1:15; 2:1-11, 31; 3:14-15 NAS.

4 Isaiah 10; Hosea 9 NAS.

5 Jer. 29:10-14; Habakkuk NAS.

6 Isa. 7:14; 53 NAS.

7 John 15:18-27 NAS.

8 Luke 24:49; John 14:16-17; Acts 1:5 NAS.

9 Matt. 13: 37-43; 25:31-46; John 13:36; 14:2-3 NAS.

10 Matt. 24 NAS.

11 Daniel Wren, *The History of Management Thought*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 36.

12 Stan Davis, *Lessons from the Future: Making Sense in a Blurred World* (Oxford, UK: Capstone, 2001), 200. and Wren, 54, 59.

13 Davis, *Lessons from the Future*, 28-29.

14 Rex M. Miller, "The Digital Dynamic: How Communications Media Shape Our World," in *Exploring Tomorrow: Keys to Success in a Rapidly Changing World*, ed. Timothy C. Mack (Bethesda, MD: World Future Society, 2005), 11.

15 Davis, *Lessons from the Future*, 11.

16 Eric Garland, *Future, Inc: How Businesses Can Anticipate and Profit From What's Next* (New York: AMACOM, 2007), 17.

17 *Ibid.*, 249-250.

18 Arnold Brown, "Not with a Bang: Civilization's Accelerating Challenge," *The Futurist*, September/October 2007, 36.

19 James E. Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2002), 13.

20 *Ibid.*, 21-26.

21 *Ibid.*, 33-41.

22 *Ibid.*, 203-219.

23 Neil Howe and William Strauss, "The Next 20 Years: How Customer and Workforce Attitude Will Evolve," *Harvard Business Review* 85, no. 7/8 (2007): 52. <http://web.ebscohost.com.eres.regent.edu:2048/>.

24 Garland, *Future, Inc*, 12.

25 Jacqueline Faulhaber, "You Have a Choice: Using Strategic Foresight to Lead Your Organization into the Future," *Leadership Advance Online*, Regent University, Summer (2007): http://regent.edu/acad/global/publications/lao/issue_10pdf/faulhaber.pdf, 1-3.

26 *Ibid.*, 1-2.

27 *Ibid.*, 2.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, 2-3.

30 *Ibid.*, 3.

31 Garland, *Future, Inc*, 133.

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