

What Experts Are Saying about *Innovative Planning: Your Church in 4-D*

"If you want to know best practices for planning in an innovative congregation, you should listen to the words of a successful innovative pastor. Through this book Bud Wrenn, speaking from the platform of success in innovative congregational ministry, provides proven methods for innovative approaches to planning for congregations."

George Bullard, The Columbia Partnership, author of *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*

"Like so many pastors, my training equipped me to preach, be doctrinally sound, and care for people. The gaping hole in my own education was organizational leadership. Many good pastors and good ministries have been torpedoed by poor process and planning skills. This practical book from Bud Wrenn can help leaders navigate the choppy waters of change and innovation. Bud has many years of experience down in the trenches of local ministry. His planning roadmap will benefit every leader."

Lance Witt, founder of Replenish Ministries and former executive pastor at Saddleback Church

"Bud has taken the elements of organizational theory and skillfully applied them to the church and church leadership. While the concepts of business and church may sometimes seem far apart, the 4D process provides good guiding principles for the 'business of church.'"

Pat Flippin, vice-president and chief operation officer, Kingsdown Corporation

"With *Innovative Planning: Your Church in 4D*, Bud Wrenn offers a start-to-finish primer for those ministry leaders whose native tongue is not strategy. He goes beyond theory to share some of the nuts and bolts of what has made him an effective pastor, leader, and colleague. His insights are certain to help others. Easy to understand, a delight to read, and helpful at every turn, *Innovative Planning* is an excellent contribution to the church."

Chad Hall, Coach Approach Ministries, author of *Coaching for Christian Leaders*

"Innovative Planning: Your Church in 4-D is a must read....as it outlines an exciting and innovative approach to developing a strong foundation for any organization. The book focuses on the organization's infrastructure, with methods and a message that are fresh. I look forward to introducing 4-D within our corporate environment."

Donna Bruno, president, Logistics Corporation

"This is a relevant, practical book with ideas that can be immediately put to use. Great stories illustrate the points, drawing the reader in. I loved it and learned some things, too!"

Linda J. Miller, The Ken Blanchard Companies

*"Many books that I read have a shelf life of about three to five years. They give valuable information and knowledge, only to be replaced by the next book that comes along. *Innovative Planning: Church in 4-D* is a different kind book. A quality leader, Bud provides practical knowledge of principles that transcends every context with dynamics that are timeless. I would encourage you to buy this book and begin living into these principles."*

Rick Hughes, senior consultant for Discipleship for North Carolina Baptists

INNOVATIVE PLANNING

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INNOVATIVE PLANNING

Your Church in 4-D

BUD WRENN



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Editor's Foreword

Inspiration and Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Christian Leaders

You have chosen wisely in deciding to study and learn from a book published in **The Columbia Partnership Leadership Series** with Chalice Press. We publish for

- Congregational leaders who desire to serve with greater faithfulness, effectiveness, and innovation.
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The Columbia Partnership Leadership Series is an inspiration- and wisdom-sharing vehicle of The Columbia Partnership, a community of Christian leaders who are seeking to transform the capacity of the North American church to pursue and sustain vital Christ-centered ministry. You can connect with us at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org.

Primarily serving congregations, denominations, educational institutions, leadership development programs, and parachurch organizations, the Partnership also seeks to connect with individuals, businesses, and other organizations seeking a Christ-centered spiritual focus.

We welcome your comments on these books, and we welcome your suggestions for new subject areas and authors we ought to consider.

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Foreword

Visionary leadership says, “We’re going to do it!” As a senior pastor my job is to continually keep the church on track to fulfilling its purpose. That gets harder and harder the larger the church gets. So my number one responsibility is to continually clarify and communicate the vision of Saddleback Church. I’m constantly answering the questions, What are we doing? Why are we here? Where are we going? And we do that through classes, articles, slogans, symbols, in any way we can. It’s important to tell people the reason we are here.

Proverbs says, “Without a vision the people perish.” So the difference between a dream and a vision is that a vision is a pragmatic dream. Lots of people have great dreams, but they can never get them in a concrete form where you can do something about it. A vision is a dream that can be implemented. It’s specific. Nothing becomes dynamic until it becomes specific.

Most churches I’ve been in have lots of talent, but they don’t have a unifying vision to motivate that talent into action. It’s wasted talent just sitting on the sidelines, not being used. If you have a vision and it’s significant and it’s meaningful, you will attract and motivate people.

So you may be asking, “How can we capture, communicate, and infuse the vision into the culture of our church so it influences all we do?”

In his book *Innovative Planning: Your Church in 4-D* Bud Wrenn answers that question. He shows you a systematic approach to planning that ensures all you do lines up with that vision. Any church leaders can influence their church to accomplish that vision by reading this book and applying its principles.

Rick Warren
Senior Pastor, Saddleback Church

Introduction

Equipped with a just-earned permit, I climbed in for my first official ride. Quickly, I discovered that driving a car is not necessarily as easy as it looks. I had been driving for a long time, since about age twelve, on the family farm, and even on the obscure paved state road that connected the farm property to the nearest major highway. So I had some experience. The 1965 “four on the floor” red Ford Mustang coupe was the car that I would drive in a few months when I got my license. It was also the car my dad found most appropriate to drive to the farm, on the farm, and around the farm. In other words, our Mustang—no—*my* Mustang, was really a farm truck disguised as a car—and, for the most part, it *looked* like a farm truck disguised as a car!

One day I suddenly found the Mustang really difficult to steer. I had to exert a good bit of effort just to make the steering wheel move. I felt like I was having a workout every time I drove. I didn’t ask Dad about it, thinking that was the way it was supposed to be.

Finally, one day my dad said something like, “*I’ve really got to get an alignment on this car.*” Knowing little about the intricacies of an automobile, I asked him what an alignment was. He explained to me, in an elementary-level lesson, that alignment is what is done to adjust the wheels to bring them in line with the chassis of the car. When the car is in alignment, he told me, it is much easier to steer. Also the tires wear more evenly, and, basically, many of the component parts of the car will last longer. Made sense to me.

I finally understood why the car never really “felt right.” I had just thought that’s the way it was! After the alignment was done, I thought I was driving a new car—uh, I mean, farm truck!

Many organizations—businesses, congregations, athletic teams, civic clubs, etc.—are like that 1965 Mustang I drove. They are out of alignment and in serious need of adjustment. Many of the leaders in these organizations are like I was—they are leading, or trying to lead, oblivious to the real condition of the organization, just as I was to the condition of the Mustang!

Organizational Alignment

Organizational alignment occurs when the component parts of an organization are pointed in the same direction. What are the

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component parts? Well, just about everything. The employees, members, associates, and whatever other terms are used to describe the people of the organization and their roles are component parts. The physical assets—equipment, machinery, and facilities—are component parts. Even the intangibles such as philosophy, beliefs, values, and vision are component parts.

Although the word *alignment* may not appear too often in the following pages, this book is really about organizational alignment and how to make it happen in your organizational context. The best way for an organization to have alignment is to intentionally create an overall framework that facilitates and preserves alignment. The organization must plan for it and work the plans that will create and sustain it.

In this book, we will look at some *not so new ideas* in a new way. We will see how organizational planning, with great intentionality, is the primary vehicle for organizational alignment. What I propose is not a *cookie-cutter mold*, or a *one-size-fits-all model* of organizational planning. Rather, I will present a paradigm that will hopefully drive a new perspective about organizational planning. Within the paradigm, an organization develops its own unique process, designed to fit its organizational context.

While we will place more emphasis on planning and execution in a congregational context, these principles will work in any organization—for profit and *not for profit*. I quite frequently hear people, particularly church leaders, say something like, “*That may work in the business world, but it won’t work in church.*” I have a real problem with that position. If a principle works, and is in line with accepted ethical and moral standards, then why can’t it work—in any organizational setting? After all, very little separates business principles and church principles. We should think, rather, in terms of *organizational* principles. Because the primary target audience for this book is the innovative congregation and congregations moving toward becoming innovative, most of the examples in this book are set in congregational contexts.

In this book we will advocate a consistent corporate language around planning for the organization. We will identify four key dimensions of planning that should be viewed sequentially and that should facilitate a consistent direction for the organization. To ensure a unified direction, these four dimensions must all be aligned. These four dimensions, when staffed properly to allow organizational members to contribute in the planning process, can *drive significant ownership* among those members. The greater the

level of ownership, the greater the organizational alignment and the greater the chance of organizational success.

Finally, we will see that to be healthy, planning must be cyclical. As the organization works through plans, it discovers new things about its environment and its own internal context. It makes adjustments based on these discoveries, and adjusts plans accordingly, on a real-time basis. *Planning, then, in a healthy organization, is a very dynamic process.* Planning becomes nearly as important a pursuit as the actual delivery of the organization's product or service to its customers. The quality of the organization's planning, then, becomes the main determinant of the organization's long-term effectiveness.

Where Is God in Planning?

When I discuss things such as planning with congregations, I invariably encounter the person who asks a question like, "*Where does the Holy Spirit fit into your process?*" or, "*Shouldn't we wait on God to show us what to do in His timing?*" While I understand and respect the thinking that leads to these questions, I feel I must lay out some underlying foundational assumptions concerning the contents of this book. I like to refer to these as "givens." In other words, for planning to be successful, it's a "given" that these things are already done or are being worked on.

1. Prayerful Preparation. All planning concerning the Kingdom of God must be approached with great prayer and prayerful attitudes. In writing this, I am assuming that *it is a given that a congregation is willing to spend time in prayer* and is seeking God's wisdom prior to beginning a planning process and during the process. This book doesn't address such techniques and approaches for doing that. There are, however, many others that do.

2. God Blesses Planning. The Bible is not "anti-planning." Rather, the book of Proverbs *advocates planning, and gives strong advice on how planning can be done effectively.* Here are just a few of those verses that give such good directions on the subject of planning.

Commit your actions to the Lord,
and then your plans will succeed. (Prov. 16:3)

We can make our plans,
but the Lord determines our steps. (Prov. 16:9)

You can make many plans,
but the Lord's purpose will prevail. (Prov. 19:21)

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Plans succeed through good counsel;
don't go to war without wise advice. (Prov. 20:18)

Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity,
but hasty shortcuts lead to poverty. (Prov. 21:5)

3. Wisdom from God. I'm one of those who believes that often the statement, "*Let me pray about it,*" can be, in many ways, a cop-out. Don't get me wrong—I used the operative words *often*, *can be*, and *in many ways* to qualify that statement. We all have decisions on which we may be afraid to pull the trigger. In many of these cases, we truly want to hear from God. Often we unnecessarily delay those decisions, waiting to hear from God, when He has already given us the wisdom to figure it out. We miss windows of opportunity. We tend to forget that in addition to working through the nudging of the Holy Spirit, God also works through His equipping us with His wisdom. James 1:5–6 speaks to this fantastic provision that God gives in response to our request! "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (NIV).

So, perhaps the best preparation for planning may be the *daily habit of praying for God's wisdom*. After all, He gave us all brains to use in making decisions, and He offers the wisdom that is needed to *fuel these brains*. We need to ask for it, use it, and trust it.

Alignment and Planning

In summary, effective organizational planning facilitates alignment in an organization, and organizational alignment enables effective planning. The two are simply inseparable. So, let's take a hard look at effective organizational planning!

PART I

A Flexible Process for Innovative Churches

The planning paradigm presented in this book is not a model. It is more of a *flexible and “customizable” approach that any organization can use*. We will refer to it periodically as “4D,” in recognition of the four dimensions of planning so foundational to the paradigm. In a congregational context, 4D can be used to implement nearly any established type of methodology. For example, since its inception twelve years ago, my home church has always been based on the “Purpose Driven” model. A real breakthrough came for us when our context was well enough defined that we could customize, or contextualize, the Purpose Driven model to match who we had become. After all, that’s exactly what Rick Warren and other proponents of “PD” encourage: *“Take the PD philosophy and methodology and make it your own.”*

Because it is a flexible, customizable framework, the 4D paradigm will work if a church wants to implement the *Purpose Driven model*, the *Connecting Church model* from Pantego Church in Ft. Worth, the *Foyer/Kitchen/Living Room model* from North Pointe Church in Atlanta, a *Willow Creek model*, or just about any other model.

Too many congregations don’t understand the value of quality planning or the relationship between the quality of the plans and the success of the congregation. The purpose of a good solid plan is to provide an ultimate destination for the congregation, the direction it must take to move toward that destination, and the detailed steps required to maintain that direction. The 4D Planning Paradigm provides a way for congregations to achieve that purpose.

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Why Is Planning So Misunderstood?

Jason Conner loved this wave his church was riding. Two years ago he had come to serve as pastor of Creekside Community Church. Creekside was a five-year-old congregation—one that had started as a mission church of Grace Baptist Church, a solid sixty-year-old congregation that, over the years, had had significant impact in its small town.

The Beginning: The Grace Model

Grace had realized a few years ago that it had been successful as a church because of its tendency to look beyond its own congregation. The church had started numerous ministries geared toward impacting those in the community. Their approach was to evangelize through service. Some ministries that proved successful, such as the *Great Shepherd Food Distribution Center*, were “spun off” to become independent agencies. Many ministries had successful runs, but eventually lost their effectiveness and were shut down. The church still maintained a few other ministries.

During recent years, the neighborhood in which Grace is located had begun to change significantly. A largely Caucasian middle-class demographic gradually gave way to a more middle-to lower-middle-class demographic much more diverse in terms of ethnicity. As a result, Grace had found the neighborhood to be much less responsive to their ministry offerings.

As it became apparent to the Grace leadership that this demographic shift would continue, the congregation began to explore

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new ways to reach the community. They chose to invest in a ministry a young adult Sunday School class suggested six years earlier—sponsor a mission church across town. The easy interstate freeway access in that area had attracted new businesses—both service-oriented and retail. In addition, real estate developers had begun to redefine the area as a bedroom community for the large town twenty-five miles up the interstate, resulting in a few new *suburban* housing developments.

Realizing that this new church could be a good way to retain some Grace members who didn't feel they could identify with the changing community and to reach new folks in a different area of town, the Grace leadership team cautiously accepted the idea. A year later, fourteen of the thirty-two members of the class left Grace to launch Creekside Community Church. This *core group* recruited a recent seminary graduate, a nephew of one of its members, to serve as its pastor. The new congregation rented the auditorium of one of the two elementary schools in town and began meeting.

The Creekside Experiment

The first two years of Creekside's ministry were extremely difficult. About fifty people came when the church opened. However, they found little opportunity to get connected beyond the Sunday morning experience. The core group had committed to emphasize *small groups*, but the immediate needs of keeping the fledgling church going seemed to divert the leaders' focus from a number of important things, such as small groups. They did not create a Sunday School.

The founding team had obviously underestimated the complexity of launching a new church. The inexperience of the young pastor had proven to be a significant hindrance in getting the new church to solid footing. Just after the congregation's two-year anniversary, the young pastor realized he was in over his head and left for a youth pastor position in an established church in a neighboring town. Six of the fourteen core team members left the church at the time of the pastor's departure. Attendance, which had never really taken off, dropped to an average of forty, down almost half from its average in the first two years. The other eight core members had committed with each other to try it once again.

After a year of prayer and developing a picture of what they really wanted Creekside to be, the remaining core group members set out to find a pastor who could lead them toward that picture.

A six-month search led them to a pastor at a small, but growing, traditional church, Antioch Church, in a neighboring state.

Rebooting Creekside Church

Jason Connor had taken the pastorate of Antioch, his first, three years prior. He had gone back to seminary after an eight-year stint as a fireman. Jason's dynamic personality and "down to earth" persona had captured the hearts of folks in this small town. When Jason began his ministry at the church, many came out of simple curiosity, liked what they saw, and stayed.

These same qualities—plus Jason's track record at Antioch— attracted the Creekside team to Jason. In his three years, attendance had increased by 125 percent. The number of baptisms at Antioch, a key metric in the denomination, had increased by a factor of twelve over that of the year prior to Jason's arrival. Amazingly, the average age of the congregation had moved from sixty to forty-two.

While seeing real success in his first pastorate, Jason had gotten caught up in what he was hearing about the more "contemporary" churches, which utilized a different kind of methodology to reach people who were not *churched*. He liked the ideas of a more casual atmosphere, music that was more upbeat and in tune with what folks were listening to on the radio, and the use of multimedia in the context of the worship service. These ideas caused a little unsettledness in Jason's mind. He was intrigued. What if God's plan for him really was to pastor a church that looked like that? These thoughts dominated Jason's mind over the next few months. He often thought about what Antioch could be if Sunday mornings looked like that! He came to the conclusion that the folks at Antioch would likely never embrace such changes, and even if they did, Jason didn't have confidence that he would know what to do to make it happen.

Then came the phone call.

The Creekside Call

The call was from the pastoral search team of a struggling fifty-member congregation called Creekside Community Church. The church wanted to be a major factor in its community and wanted to use contemporary methods to reach those who weren't in church in their area. To Jason, the search team seemed to be a group of honest, authentic folks. He almost immediately sensed a good fit with them.

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The three-month “courtship” between Creekside and Jason comprised lots of phone conversations and prayer. Each side agreed to proceed cautiously, not wanting to rush anything. Gradually, everyone seemed to feel progressively better about the potential in the relationship. About one hundred days after their first phone conversation, Jason accepted the offer to become the new pastor at Creekside, despite the significant pay cut he would have to take. He saw great opportunity and, most importantly, God’s hand all over this move.

However, two years into his leadership at Creekside, Jason faced a real challenge. He had focused primarily on transforming a dull Sunday service into a vibrant worship experience. Attendance increased steadily until Creekside had to go to two services in the rented high school facilities. A number of the new arrivals were excellent musicians, and some would ultimately form a dynamic worship band. The church’s music had become the calling card for CCC.

The Creekside Crossroad

But Jason found himself at a crossroad. For the most part, the 250-plus people at CCC enjoyed being there. Excitement was high. But a number of the regulars at Creekside began asking Jason, “*What’s next for Creekside?*” They, like so many, loved the energetic services at CCC. But many of them realized that church goes far beyond Sunday morning. To them, a number of areas needed further development.

The leadership team, consisting of Jason and the other eight core team members, realized that not a lot seemed to be getting accomplished in the church. Volunteer commitment was fairly tenuous and sporadic. The children’s ministry was quite large with all the young families that had begun attending Creekside, requiring a large volunteer crew. Nearly as much time was spent finding substitutes for regular Sunday morning workers, as was spent in recruiting regular workers in the first place. Also, sustaining a small groups ministry was very difficult, as it seemed that Creekside people just didn’t seem to *do church stuff* once Sunday morning was over.

As this question of “*What’s next?*” became more prominent, Jason got a little queasy. He really didn’t know what was next for Creekside. He knew that discovering the answer would involve some significant planning time. Being a spontaneous kind of guy, planning was something he didn’t think came naturally to

him. After all, in Antioch, his first church, the rural congregation was basically run by the deacon board. Jason's most significant planning had to do with what to teach on Sundays. He generally took direction from the deacons.

Feeling a little lost as to what to do next, Jason decided to do what a pastor friend of his did—he would take the CCC Leadership Team on a weekend planning retreat. Maybe “the team” could figure out what was next. But this brought up the next dilemma for Jason—what would they do on the retreat? How would they go about answering the “*What's next?*” question?

Jason had attended many church growth & health conferences. In these conferences, he had sat under the teaching of some of the most celebrated leaders in the Christian world. He also had read some of the top books that addressed the same things. Therefore, Jason felt that he had a pretty good idea of how a healthy, growing congregation should look. Just as he had visualized what Antioch would look like with a more contemporary style of worship and atmosphere, he had done the same with Creekside. Only with Creekside, he had focused his imagination on more than just what could be seen on the surface on Sunday mornings. With Creekside, he thought about the *underlying, foundational principles* that would help the congregation reach a level of health.

Before he had come to Creekside, the congregation had developed a fairly clear picture of how the church should look in the future. Jason had bought into that picture and added some thoughts and ideas that the Creekside folks embraced—even before he agreed to come aboard as the pastor of Creekside.

Creekside's Confusion: Pastoring ≠ Leading

But Jason's struggle had always been, and continued to be, with the question “*How do we get there?*” In the conferences he had attended, and in the books he had read, Jason never felt he had discovered the answer to that question. Now, just a week before the retreat, twenty-seven Creekside members had committed to participate. He knew the right questions were “*Where do we go?*” and “*How do we get there?*” But he had no answer. What would he do with them? What would the retreat look like? What would they get accomplished? Now that queasy feeling felt like a chronic condition.

Jason's problem was not the conferences he was attending or the books he was reading. He was an eager learner. The conferences and books helped him develop a personal picture of *what could be*

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for his ministry and the congregations he served. The real issue was the fact that in the conferences and books, he didn't think he had run across anything that looked like it would help his congregation get from here to there. He simply hadn't seen what he considered a user-friendly planning process—one that would work for a novice like himself.

Jason is like so many other pastors who are faced with the big task of leading a church. Pastoring and leading can require totally different skill sets. Planning and carrying out church activities, sermon series, and pastoral care duties are quite different from leading people to plan together for the future of a church, and different from leading people in carrying out those plans.

■ **Pastoring and leading can require totally different skill sets.**

To make things even more confusing, transferring the information gleaned from conferences and books, while usually quite valuable, into the local church context is often difficult. Jason's—and Creekside's—situation highlights some typical problems with planning in the church.

Problems in Planning: Inadequate Approaches

Many churches believe themselves to be effective at planning. But all too many do not realize they are taking faulty approaches. So, often this results in plateaued churches without a vision of the future.

The Maintenance Approach

■ **In many churches, the underlying perception is that there is no need for real planning, as the preservation of the status quo is a high value.**

For many congregations, the standard mode of operation is maintaining the status quo. The congregation simply perpetuates its existence. The focus is most likely on how things have been done in the past. *Doing* church as it has always been done, rather than *being* the church that is relevant in today's world, is most likely the pursuit of this congregation. The desire to operate as it always has offers little or no incentive for innovation. Quickly outdated, these congregations are almost always on the decline. They are dying and are most often unaware of their condition. Seeing no need for significant change, these churches cultivate the

underlying perception that they have no need for real planning, as the preservation of the status quo is a high value.

The Big Blob Approach

To be successful, a congregation must first recognize the purpose of planning. Jesus spoke of the role of planning in Luke 14:28–29:

“But don’t begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you.”

■ **Failure to distinguish the dimensions of planning will ultimately lead to ineffective and unrealistic plans.**

A congregation must recognize the *different dimensions of planning* that must be approached sequentially. For example, effective planning must begin with the big picture and move toward more concrete plans regarding what must be done to bring that big picture to reality. Unfortunately, even the vast majority of well-meaning congregations that do place value in the planning process don’t distinguish the different dimensions. They often see planning as one “big blob” and not as a process with unique dimensions. Failure to distinguish these dimensions of planning will ultimately lead to ineffective and unrealistic plans. The reality of these dimensions and how they interrelate is the primary subject we will deal with in the subsequent pages.

The Once and for All Approach

Many congregations view planning as a discrete exercise and not as a continuous, systematic process. Because churches are largely volunteer organizations, the task of pulling together a planning effort is often a huge endeavor. For example, a congregation schedules planning meetings, retreats, etc., over a predetermined period of time. Their desire may truly be to develop a solid plan for the congregation. The big challenges are (a) *scheduling the best time* for participants to come together, and (b) once they’re available, *getting volunteers to set aside enough time* to make the planning exercise worthwhile. For many churches, just pulling off the planning exercise takes an incredible amount of time and energy. The result

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may be that these planning efforts, because of those time and energy requirements, become *discrete exercises*. The planning process comes to be viewed in terms of one-time, stand-alone events, which become few and far between.

Two dangers here are quite obvious. First, the plans resulting from the exercise will be shaped and constrained by (a) time limitations and (b) the perspectives of the people available to participate. The planning process in any organization will always be driven by the particulars of the people who participate. The more effective the group of participants, the higher the quality of the ensuing plans.

■ **Effective planning requires a continuous, systematic approach, rather than one that views planning in terms of discrete exercises.**

Second, the congregations' own internal demographics and environmental conditions will inevitably change—perhaps quite rapidly. The congregation embracing discrete planning exercises will then, at some point, find itself working from a *stand-alone* plan developed with assumptions that are no longer valid. This situation will cause such a church to have to wait until the next planning initiative is scheduled before it can address the changing demographic and environmental conditions.

Congregations must be flexible enough to adapt to rapid changes in their environments—both internally and externally. They need to understand that effective planning requires a continuous, systematic approach, rather than one that views planning in terms of discrete exercises.

The Mix and Match Approach

I usually kick off planning seminars by asking the groups a question such as, “What words come to your mind when I say the word *planning*? The floodgates usually open. I hear responses—“goals...strategy...timeline...mission statement...action plan...objectives...vision...to-do lists...results...” The list goes on.

Then I'll ask, “Now if all of you in this room were to give me your definitions of each of those words and phrases, how many different sets of definitions would we have?” Then they get the picture. The collective response is usually something along the lines of, “We would have as many different sets of definitions as we have people in the room.” That's the point—planning, and planning terms, mean different things to different people.

This is especially significant in congregations where most of the members spend as much as half of their waking time working professionally in noncongregational organizations—nearly all of which have differing ideas of what planning is all about. Their perceptions about planning, then, are most naturally shaped by those organizations in which they spend so much of their time.

So, in congregations, not only do most of the members bring to the table preconceived notions about planning, but they also bring a significant diversity of views of planning, uniquely shaped by the workplace.

A consistent corporate language is a clear prerequisite for effective planning to take place in any organization. Definitions of planning and planning levels often overlap, leading to great confusion. Congregations, then, must *work doubly hard to bring clarity to their corporate language* with regard to planning simply because of the diversity of views among their people. Although this will take great amounts of time and attention to detail, the value of *everyone singing from the same sheet of music* is critical in ensuring an effective outcome.

■ **Congregations, then, must work doubly hard to bring clarity to their corporate language with regard to planning.**

The Open Invitation Approach

Even with an understanding of the distinct dimensions of planning, congregations may expect leaders to function effectively in planning, with little or no regard to how they are wired and gifted. Even congregations that desire to be innovative can quickly lose their edge if they don't have a proper perspective on using the right people, in the right roles, in the right dimensions, in congregational planning.

Jim Collins speaks of companies who have been able to move from being very good organizations to really great organizations. His research discovered that a key factor is the organization's ability, first, to get the right people into the company ("*...the right person on the right bus...*"), and second, to get the right person into the right position ("*...the right person in the right seat on the bus...*").¹ This is certainly a major key in congregations as well.

Often churches try an *open invitation approach* based on the valid assumption that participation *drives ownership* into people. They want to involve as many people as possible in the planning

¹Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 41.

process. Another less-healthy driver for this approach may be the potential fear of what folks may say if they are left out, or “not invited.” Another driver may just be to get enough people together to reach what may be considered *critical mass*—i.e., a certain number of people needed to be involved to validate the process.

The danger of the *open invitation* is the possibility of having people involved in types of planning that they are not comfortable with, or equipped to, participate in. This can lead to ineffectiveness in the process and a faulty final product.

■ **The danger of the open invitation is the possibility of having people involved in types of planning that they are not comfortable with, or equipped to participate in.**

If an organization understands that planning has distinct dimensions, then it has to accept two related realities. First, *not everyone is geared toward working in all the dimensions of planning*. Second, *participants should be focused toward working in the dimension(s) of planning in which they are truly comfortable*.

Faulty Perceptions Lead to Faulty Results

With so many churches in the American culture in serious decline or having reached plateaued positions (estimates range anywhere from 60–90 percent), serious consideration has to be given to discovering why this has happened. While surely the factors are far too numerous to be incorporated into this work, we can safely assume that in perhaps the majority of churches the lack of a healthy planning process is a significant contributor. Even in the more innovative churches that I relate to, leaders admit serious deficiencies in their planning processes.

It doesn't make much sense to try to play a game of darts without a dartboard. Darts themselves can be quite dangerous, and if aimed and thrown at the wrong targets, they can cause much damage. Many congregations are doing the same thing. They are playing the “game” of church. Without a planning process that gives them the proper direction, they are like the dart thrower who aims, but has no target. Even if the thrower hits where he aims, he will never know whether his target was the right one. He never knows whether he has won the game.

Pulling It Together

Congregations typically don't utilize healthy planning processes as tools to help them be successful. Perhaps the typical congregation doesn't see the value of healthy planning. Or perhaps the

constraints associated with a primarily volunteer organization preclude the typical congregation from being able to invest the time, energy, and resources required to build a healthy planning process. Congregations may be affected by one or more of a number of misconceptions.

- Many congregations are perfectly content to maintain who they have been and what they have. Planning is not necessary as they *see no need for change*.
- Congregations fail to distinguish the *unique dimensions of planning*. They fail to first establish the big picture and then move toward the steps required to make the big picture come to reality.
- Planning in many churches is not viewed as a *continuous, systematic process*, but rather as a discrete, stand-alone event. This leads to a significant inability to adapt to changing demographic and environmental conditions facing the church.
- Few churches have a sense of a *corporate language* with regard to planning. Different terms mean different things to different people. It takes great time and effort to create such a corporate language, as the church has to assimilate the various meanings that members bring into the congregational structure.
- Congregations often expect members to participate in planning, however it may look, with little or no regard to how they are wired and gifted. Planning is a multidimensional process, and people are not typically geared to work effectively in each of these dimensions.

If a church is to be successful, it must embrace the value of planning, and understand some very foundational principles about how planning can be integrated into the life of the congregation.