

“So What Is Strategic Planning?”

Strategic Planning as Applied Ecclesiology

So what is strategic planning? There seems to be so many answers to that question, so here's mine. But before we consider what strategic planning is, perhaps we could provide a fuller understanding of “strategy”—from both a planning / organizational point-of-view and a theological point-of-view. You may find my answer a bit surprising...

At the core of all human organizations is always a single common purpose: to make something different than it was before. That is why organizations exist: to effect some kind of change. What distinguishes human organizations from each other are their unique answers to the question, “so what are we here to change?” The answer to this question is the organization's *purpose* or *mission*. *Strategy* is how an organization seeks to achieve its purpose. In a business the purpose may be to make money for the shareholders, and the strategy may be to assemble and sell automobiles. In that world the strategy is called a business plan. As a Christian faith community our mission is to honour God by implementing our ecclesiology, which is our strategy... our business plan. Ecclesiology is our theological understanding of not only the purpose / mission of the church but also its very nature. This may sound so very peculiar until one looks at the church from God's perspective. God has desires for creation and a mission in the world.... *and the church is one of God's strategies to fulfill God's purpose*. The church is a strategy, and our ecclesiology defines it. **Strategic planning is how we the church assesses and adjusts the strategy: us.**

Dr. Craig Van Gelder gives a practical summary of ecclesiology in his 2000 book, *The Essence of the Church*,

“There are three aspects of church life that must be defined and related to one another:
what the church is – its nature;
what the church does – its ministry; and
how the church is to structure its work – its organization.

The interrelationship of the three aspects is clear. The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does.” (pg 37)

Some people might say that “what the church does—its ministry” is its strategy. There is some practical truth to this idea, and a lot of strategic planning in churches is based on this assumption. But it's only part of the answer... and our ecclesiology is not as simple and linear as Van Gelder's definition here.

So if the church is a strategy then perhaps we should inquire more deeply into strategy's nature. McGill professor Henry Mintzberg is considered to be among the world's top ten management thinkers and perhaps the world's most astute observer of strategic thinking. Here are a few of his ideas that I think are incredibly helpful to us.

First, we tend to think of strategic planning exclusively as a cerebral, deliberate endeavour (that is: it begins with solid analysis; then direction is envisioned, adopted and pursued as designed to its conclusion). Mintzberg doesn't. He thinks that strategy is only partially deliberate. He asserts that it is also necessarily emergent: that unknown factors, unanticipated obstacles, serendipitous learnings and unforeseen opportunities cause strategies to evolve.... as they must if the purpose / mission is to be achieved. In other words, strategy is unavoidably contextual, and the reality is that context is ever changing. This is a very helpful reminder for church leaders because it adds a filter to Van Gelder's description of the three-fold essence of the church: relevance. "What the church does—its ministry" and "how the church is to structure its work—its organization" must be relevant to the context. Our ever changing context is two-fold:

1. The congregations themselves, with their culture (their beliefs, values, priorities and norms of behaviour) and resources (human, financial, physical).
2. The society in which our congregations find themselves.

The idea that strategy is necessarily emergent and unavoidably contextual is helpful to the church. I suspect we can all say that the changes we've seen through our generation have been the results of unexpected factors which have created unanticipated obstacles. I also suspect that part of the dilemma that the church feels it is in can be attributed in part to maintaining a fixed ecclesiology while the church's context continues to evolve. And I suspect as well that there are some unknown opportunities that we as yet don't fully appreciate because we too quickly focus on our losses. But if we think strategy is emergent, then "what the church does—its ministry" must be ever pliable and responsive to the context. Our effectiveness in achieving our purpose / mission depends on that pliability. Again, think of the church from God's perspective. We are one of God's strategies in fulfilling God's mission. If the context has shifted so much that God's strategy (us) is becoming less effective, then might God want the strategy (the church) to be adjusted? So what is the implication for strategic planning? While the core strategy may remain unchanged (ie. God influences the renewal of human life through the presence, ministry and witness of faith communities), the priorities the church has can (perhaps "need") to shift... and new ways to pursue those priorities may need to be chosen. A shifting context requires the emergence of new priorities and practices.

A second bit of wisdom from Dr. Mintzberg. He also suggests that strategy is in part *perspective*: it is a way of seeing things. Our point-of-view is always strategic because it shapes

- how we interpret our purpose / mission,
- how we understand our organization,
- limits what we will accept as "appropriate" ways of fulfilling our mission,
- and frames how we create organizational structures.

This too is helpful for the church because it suggests that our point-of-view will shape not only "how the church is to structure its work – its organization"... not only "what the church does—its ministry"... but in fact it also shapes our sense of "what the church is—its nature." In other words, how we understand the nature of the church has a deep impact on how we go about pursuing our purpose / mission. The implication is this: strategic planning should influence our perspective on the nature of the church and lead to adjustments in our ecclesiology. This could be a disturbing thought until one remembers our history. Recall the Reformation: it was a

moment when some priorities of the purpose / mission of the church were renewed, and that renewal required a reworking not only of the church's ministry and organization but also a whole new point-of-view on its very nature. The same thing happened again in the Second Great Awakening early in the 19th century that led to the emergence of evangelical denominations.

The idea that our point-of-view is a strategy itself is also helpful to the church because it suggests a need to utilize an age old practice of the church: theological reflection. Theological reflection helps us improve our ecclesiology, which is our point-of-view... *it is our strategy*. Or, better put, it is how we understand ourselves as God's strategy. No matter what tradition of Christianity one follows a congregation's sense of the nature, ministry and organization of the church—its ecclesiology—will inevitably have an impact on how it pursues its purpose / mission. To have an effective strategy—and to be *God's effective strategy*—the church needs to reflect on its sense of the nature of the church while being fully aware of its context. We must give ourselves permission to let our ecclesiology be emergent. As a theological discipline it is called doing "practical theology." We see so many examples of this today in new ecclesiologies such as the emergent movement, the missional church, practicing congregations, the house church movement, new monasticism, and so on. Our point-of-view—that is, our ecclesiology—is a strategy in itself, because it is how we understand ourselves as God's strategy.

So, to sum up:

- The church is a strategy God uses to fulfill God's mission.
- Strategy is how an organization pursues the fulfilment of its purpose / mission. For the church, our strategy is explained through our ecclesiology.
- Strategy is always contextual... mindful of the context found within the church as well as beyond its walls. Being mindful of the context ensures that the strategy is relevant.
- How we understand the very nature of the church—our ecclesiology—is a strategy itself. Reflecting contextually on our ecclesiology ensures that the faithful priorities we set for the here-and-now and for the foreseeable future will be relevant ones, leading to greater effectiveness in fulfilling God's purpose / mission.

So what is strategic planning?

It is course correcting our strategy—in our very nature, our ministry and our organization.

It helps us reflect on and revise how we understand the church—our ecclesiology.

It needs to be an on-going process, since our context is ever changing and our strategy must remain relevant.

It is how we stay faithful to God, because we are God's strategy. We honour God in part by striving to be as effective as we can in helping God fulfill God's mission in the world.

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