

Did Jesus Have a Strategic Plan?

By David S. Young

When anyone brings up the topic of renewal, someone is bound to ask, “Do you have a strategic plan?” How many times have we used the model where the leadership team goes to a retreat center to establish goals? Then we create newspaper pages listing “What’s right with our church?” “What is not so right about our church?” “Where would we like to be in five years?”

A vision statement is created, goals are set, and appropriate tasks are assigned to those in charge of each area. Some folks talk about gaining advantage, leverage, as it is often called. The team returns home energized to get buy-in from appropriate people and committees. Often the dilemma is that the folks back home seem to have no ownership (or interest) in the vision. Discouragement sets in; the plan is shelved.

In the story of the woman at the well in John 4, Jesus shows the way to renewal. Four “dynamics of renewal” arise right in the text: thirst, encounter, transformation, and mission. Rather than managerial principles, the good news of the gospel is found right in the text and can guide the renewal process. This is a Christ-centered renewal based on resurrection hope! Jesus shows the way!

Did Jesus have a strategic plan? On one hand, we admit it is doubtful. We don’t hear him project the number of people he would feed or how much attendance would increase at his events. On the other hand, he moved with great intentionality. He had purpose in meeting the woman, knew how to reach her, and see her life trans-

formed. He knew she could learn how to share life-giving water with others.

Thirst

So where do we begin in our planning? Repeatedly in our work in church renewal we hear the thirst to grow spiritually. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”

This spiritual thirst is compounded by a number of factors in our era. Not only do we have the financial foundations of our lives impacted by the world economy, but we have anxiety and fear in the violence and negative influences in our society. Discouragement abounds. Bad news is not just in some remote region, but on our doorstep, on TV, computer, or newspaper.

In the story of the woman at the well, two people are thirsty: the woman and Jesus. Their thirst differs in nature. The woman is thirsty because she would be ostracized if she had visited the well in the presence of others, so she comes to the well at high noon. Jesus is thirsty from his travels.

Returning to the topic of “Did Jesus Have a Strategic Plan?” we can with some certainty say that while he may not have planned to double his audience, he did have a plan to enter dialogue with a woman about her spiritual thirst. Rather than setting growth goals for the year, his

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plan was to follow her thirst and meet her spiritual needs. In our efforts in church renewal, it is a fitting goal to meet people's spiritual thirst

Jesus follows the spiritual thirst

In a congregation it only takes one person with a desire to grow spiritually to facilitate the whole body to begin to renew. In servant leadership we respect each person and take seriously a desire for more. One way that Jesus did planning was to identify those who were thirsty spiritually. Taking clues from Jesus, we could ask, "Who are those who are lonely and isolated?"

At one church I noticed on home visits that there were many widows who were lonely and who had not yet reconciled with their loss even though it might have been ten years before. So we established a Wednesday afternoon grief group giving spiritual resources for loss and looking at the usual guidelines of how to handle loss. One announcement was made. Seventeen people showed up.

While such indicators of thirst can help develop a plan for ministry, the Springs of Living Water renewal process gives an even more comprehensive way to plan for renewal. Speaking about how Christian communities can break down because they spring from wish dreams, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together* how "God's grace speedily shatters such dreams." So we ask, "Where is God leading this church?" Thirst is a gift of God that leads people to find a path where God is calling your church.

Encounter

In the second dynamic of renewal, encounter, Jesus shows the way by the nature of his interaction with the woman. Rather than tell the woman what to do, he offers a grace-filled space of discovery. Jesus is able to reach over barriers and build a relationship. With exquisite timing he draws the woman out and empowers her by asking her for a drink.

If by a strategic plan we mean to have the right location at the right time of day and the right travel route, Jesus had none of those factors in place. What he did have was the ability to create a context where he could meet the spiritual needs of a woman where she was and offer her what she needed most deeply. Jesus takes the time to communicate the good news of the gospel.

Jesus offers Life-Giving Water

Often in planning we want to take care of things right away. But like losing weight, spiritual growth is a long-term process that takes time. The danger in setting goals in times of desolation is that they may be unrealistic. In times like these, it is goals should begin with the basics – they should be a response to spiritual thirst. When they are, we can develop a plan to introduce or increase spiritual disciplines like regular Bible reading and prayer, worship, and service.

A tool we've used to help people develop daily disciplines is a spiritual disciplines folder. The folder includes an explanation, Sunday texts and worship services, and

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daily scripture texts for reading. In addition, the participants are invited to explore where God is leading to live daily in Christ's way.

As people begin to learn and use daily disciplines, they begin to encounter Jesus in fresh ways. Individually they can place their lives before God so that God can transform them. Corporately a church begins to feel they have entered a spiritual journey and a new sense of unity develops.

Us? Give Jesus a Drink ?

One of the most intriguing ways Jesus had in his planning was to help people discover what they had to offer. He did not just tell the woman at the well what he had to offer her, but he invited her to give what she could offer! A drink! A drink? It seems such a simple, insignificant offering ... and yet, "Once cup of water ..." can make an eternal difference. In our "strategic plans" do we consider what the least likely ones, the marginal, the lonely, may have to offer?

In church renewal, how can we invite people to give Jesus a drink? I am thrilled when I see those who thought they had nothing to offer finding themselves immersed in a ministry. I am moved in a congregational gathering when an unlikely person has touched another. I am

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astounded how the least likely one discerns a vision. How can we discover unlikely people in unlikely places, present the gospel anew, and ask them for a “drink”?

Transformation

The first two renewal dynamics Jesus used in his “strategic plan” was addressing spiritual thirst and the encounter. The third dynamic of renewal is transformation. In strategic planning we often look at how to create change in order to achieve performance goals (bigger and/or better). Jesus seems to know he wouldn’t gain wide approval. He didn’t seem too concerned about bigger and better, at least not by human standards? Instead, he focused on transformed lives! Transformed churches! In church renewal this is the tougher challenge.

One of the most effective ways for total congregational renewal is to invite total congregational participation. Rather than a leadership team going off for planning, invite the whole church to be part of five or six gatherings. The fundamental theme upon which these gatherings are built is, “Rather than find out what is wrong and fix it, find out what is right and build upon it.”

In the first gathering we ask people in small groups, “What are the strengths of your church?” We do not ask, “What is wrong?” By using Appreciative Inquiry, the wrong is crowded out. In fact, God’s gifts and talents lie in what is right in a church. You can’t build a ministry in an area where you don’t have gifted leaders. So we have developed a process of a number of gatherings to find out what is right and build upon it. One church put their strengths on video streaming for when people entered the front door.

Mission

The fourth dynamic is mission. In reading the story in John 4, I’ve never been sure why the woman leaving her water pot behind was mentioned. While writing this article, it occurred to me that the water pot is integral to the story. It is a symbol that she implemented her mission and left the past behind. Many “strategic plans” falter at this very point. Someone has said strategic plans are often not implemented because circumstances change. Or there is a lack of energy. Or the people don’t embrace them. Or any of a dozen other excuses.

In John 4, the woman leaves her water pot to engage her mission. But where does she go? She returns to her hometown. We might ask, wouldn’t it be better to enter “the

ministry” and take to the road with Jesus? And yet she knows she should invite her loved ones to meet this man and determine who he is for themselves.

Something in her manner must have been new, authentic, and winsome. And from that, they in turn invite Jesus to stay on in their home. And they too believe. Is this not the way that Jesus shows? Is this not a different way to go about mission?

Somehow the challenge for us is to trust that those who have changed lives can discern the needed ministries. In church renewal, this is exactly what we attempt to do. The imagination and the creativity of people in what they discern as their ministries is amazing. And that is what makes church renewal so exciting. It is like bringing out the beauty in an old building that once again is functional.

This is the kingdom work we envision for the church. Indeed Jesus shows the way. Maybe he had a strategic plan after all, but not like what we have known. Jesus is so able to meet people who are thirsty, call upon them to serve in mission, give them the Living Water so their lives are transformed, and they go to the place where they feel led. There is no stopping this church.

This is how we have seen churches grow, first within their own membership and then with new people almost mysteriously showing up. Somehow the word always seems to get out when a church becomes a vital place. Perhaps it’s because when the church attends to the strategic plan that satisfies those who thirst, like the woman at the well, people tell other people. 

