



Systemic Futures: Leveraging Strategic Foresight for Holistic Human Flourishing in Christian Leadership

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Roundtable: Strategic Foresight

Abstract

This article investigates the application of strategic foresight methodologies by Christian leaders to promote comprehensive human flourishing across personal, communal, and societal dimensions. By integrating a systems approach with foresight tools such as environmental scanning, scenario planning, and backcasting, leaders can better anticipate changes, reframe perspectives, and uncover innovations necessary for realizing a biblical vision of flourishing. The study includes case studies that demonstrate Christian organizations' successful use of strategic foresight. The findings emphasize the critical role of foresight in equipping today's "chiefs of Issachar" to discern future trajectories and develop strategies aligned with divine purposes.

Keywords: strategic foresight, human flourishing, Christian leadership, scenario planning, backcasting, environmental scanning, futures thinking

Introduction

The world is changing rapidly due to forces like globalization, technology, and urbanization. Merely seeking incremental improvements will be insufficient for Christian leaders seeking to promote holistic human flourishing – the fulfillment of God's purposes for personal, communal, and societal well-being across spiritual, relational, physical, and vocational dimensions. Strategic foresight empowers leaders to explore plausible futures, identify emerging issues, and develop strategies aligned with a biblical vision of flourishing for all. As Richard Slaughter (1997) defines it: "Strategic foresight is the ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view, and to use the insights arising in organizationally useful ways" (p. 14). By fusing future methods with strategic practices, foresight allows organizations to stand in the future and look back at the present, rather than just extrapolating the past (van der Laan, 2021).

Why Foresight for Christian Leaders?

The biblical vision aligns with promoting holistic shalom (peace) and flourishing. However, the rapidly changing landscape creates new challenges and opportunities for realizing this vision that require discernment. Strategic foresight can help Christian leaders

- anticipate change that impacts human flourishing across dimensions,
- reveal innovative approaches to emerging issues, and
- stress-test strategies against potential disruptions.

As the biblical “chiefs of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (*New King James Bible*, 1979/1982, 1 Chron.12:32), foresight equips today’s leaders to discern the trajectories shaping the future and chart a wise course aligned with God’s purposes.

Foresight Tools and Methodologies

Key foresight practices to advance a vision of human flourishing include:

- **Environmental scanning:** Systematically monitoring trends, events, and weak signals across areas like technology, economics, politics, values, and demographics (STEEP+V analysis) (Puatany, 2023).
- **Scenario planning:** Developing multiple plausible scenarios about how the future could unfold based on key drivers of change. This surfaces new perspectives and implications (Ringland, 2014).
- **Backcasting:** Defining a desirable future vision first, then working backwards to identify policies and actions needed to realize that vision (Brewer, 1976).
- **Visioning:** A process where stakeholders co-create shared positive images of the future to guide strategy and planning (Clampett, 2022).
- **Strategic conversations:** Using foresight findings to foster critical debates that challenge assumptions and reframe strategic issues (Thanager & Co, 2023).

The Foresight Process

Figure 1: A Typical Strategic Foresight Process Flow



Note: Based on insights from Bengston (2013).

The strategic foresight process begins by framing the issue around human flourishing. This is followed by an environmental scan to identify trends, signals, and drivers. Multiple scenarios are then developed to imagine how the future could unfold. A visioning phase co-creates a preferred future state. Finally, the insights are translated into strategies and plans.

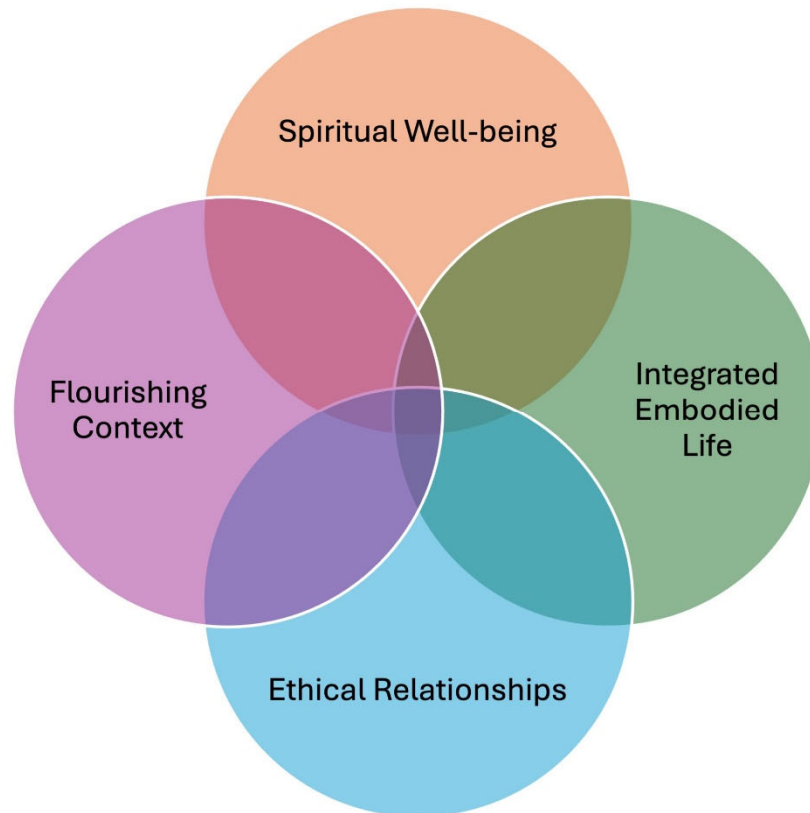
Applying Foresight for Human Flourishing

One perspective views human flourishing as embodying four interrelated dimensions:

- **Relationship with God:** spiritual well-being and experiencing divine love
- **Relationships with others:** ethical treatment, social belonging, cultural expression
- **Integrated embodied life:** physical, mental, and emotional health; living one's calling
- **Particular context:** flourishing within one's circumstances and place

By examining how emerging trends could impact these dimensions, leaders can develop strategies and innovations that holistically promote flourishing.

Figure 2: The Four Dimensions of Human Flourishing



Note: Based on insights from Mueller (2022).

A holistic view of human flourishing encompasses spiritual well-being, ethical treatment of others, integrated personal health and calling, and flourishing within one's particular life circumstances. For example, scenario planning could explore how trends like rising loneliness, ecological damage, or workforce automation may affect human relationships, health, and vocational callings in the future. Backcasting from a vision of flourishing communities could reveal policies, partnerships, or technologies needed to get there (Brewer, 1976).

Case Study: A Christian University

Grand Canyon University has adopted a "Christ-centered vision for human flourishing" across intellectual, moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. They state, "As creatures made in the image of God, flourishing in the most profound sense entails communion with God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy

Spirit” (Mueller, 2022, p. 1). The university sees its role as intentionally contributing to the common good and human flourishing by helping students cultivate their gifts and discover creation’s potential in ways that honor God (Mueller, 2022).

Foresight in Practice

One Christian leadership organization illustrates how to begin using foresight through guided discussions:

- What emerging trends, issues, and choices do we see in our environment?
- How might these combine to change our future environment?
- To what new horizon is God calling us?
- Is our organization prepared for the future 5, 10, 20 years out? (Maramara, 2023)

By exploring such questions, Christian leaders can uncover potential futures and develop strategies to leverage emerging opportunities to advance a biblical vision of human flourishing.

Key Takeaways and Calls to Action

- **Adopt strategic foresight practices:** Christian leaders and organizations should adopt strategic foresight practices like environmental scanning, scenario planning, and backcasting to anticipate changes, reframe perspectives, and uncover innovations for human flourishing (Thanager & Co, 2023).
- **Foster strategic conversations:** Leverage foresight findings to foster critical strategic conversations that challenge assumptions, reframe issues through a flourishing lens, and co-create shared positive visions (Maramara, 2023).
- **Equip today’s chiefs of Issachar:** As Christian leaders discerning “the times,” leverage foresight to develop wise strategies aligned with God’s purposes for holistic personal, communal and societal well-being (Livingston, 2024).

Conclusion

The rapidly changing landscape presents challenges but also opportunities for realizing God’s vision of human flourishing across personal, communal and societal dimensions. Strategic foresight equips Christian leaders to anticipate changes impacting flourishing, reframe perspectives, and develop adaptive, innovative strategies grounded in a richer understanding of the future.

By leveraging methodologies like environmental scanning, scenario planning and backcasting, leaders can illuminate the pathways and innovations needed to holistically promote spiritual, relational, physical, and vocational well-being (Livingston, 2024). In doing so, they can continue the legacy of the chiefs of Issachar who discerned the times

and knew what to do. Strategic foresight empowers Christian leaders to be better prepared as ministers of healing, guiding communities towards the flourishing that God intends (Puatany, 2023).

About the Author

Dr. Rodney B. Woods, a certified executive coach and a 2021 strategic foresight doctoral graduate of Regent University, is a prominent figure in leadership and strategy. Currently serving as the vice president and chief clinical engineer at BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, Dr. Woods has significantly impacted organizations through his multifaceted expertise and extensive knowledge in strategic foresight, leadership development, strategic planning, innovation strategies, organizational culture, and the dynamics of social change.

As a dynamic conference speaker and author, Dr. Woods's academic excellence, practical experience, and engaging presentations make him a sought-after authority in strategic foresight, leadership, and innovation. He inspires and equips individuals and organizations to excel in today's dynamic world. His forthcoming book, *Envision: Leading and Thriving in Disruption*, promises to be a valuable resource for leaders seeking to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing environment.

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