

looking ahead: dreaming and developing

If God has given you a dream, an ambition of what you want to achieve, how do you ensure that the dream becomes reality? As I read recently, 'No-one ever fulfils a dream just by thinking about it. Success is the result of deliberate planning and takes place when preparation meets opportunity' (Baker page 197) .

Most of us are now used to the idea of goal setting with the churches or teams we lead. But what about our personal goals, our personal dreams? In a secular context, this might be called 'career planning'. But in church leadership we think of what we do as a 'vocation', not a 'career'. And sometimes, I believe, that can make us less strategic in how we think. If we are an associate or a curate, we may have a time limit which forces us to think, 'what next?' But we look for our next post without trying to see it in the context of a bigger picture. We know that trying to map our path for the rest of our lives would only make God laugh – so we may not even think much about it. And in any case, we are too busy doing what God's given us to do now to think much about the future.

But looking ahead is an area which will be familiar to anyone who works in a professional environment; they, and those they work with, will often have a clear career progression in mind, even if life, events, and competing priorities mean that this works out differently from how they expect. Research shows that on the whole women fail to be as intentional as men, in thinking and planning ahead, and thus fail to achieve the same level of leadership.

God has a plan

But why should we as Christians fail to be intentional about what we do? After all, God knows even before we are born the plan for our lives (Jeremiah 1:5); this does not mean that our lives are determined, but it suggests pattern and purpose. And we can see in Scripture that God has future leadership in mind long before the person themselves is aware of it. Did Moses know, as he contemplated his strange life as a Hebrew in the Egyptian court, that this was exactly what he would need in the future? Did Mary know, as she learned the Scriptures as a child, that she would be chosen to be the mother of God's son?

While my life has taken unexpected twists and turns, I've known disappointment and sometimes I seem to have hit dead ends, I have trusted that God has always known what he is doing. Sometimes I've had to trust that he would bring something good out of what felt like disaster. But more recently I have tried to look back to discern patterns, and bringing these to God, to look to the future.

Some years ago, I did some research and wrote a thesis. Little did I know how much this would help me when I came to write a book and needed to handle a large amount of text. At one point, I did a crash course in typing. It seemed a retrograde step in terms of moving upwards on a career path, but I saw God's hand in it, and I am for ever grateful that I can touch type, as it makes writing sermons – and writing articles! – so much faster and easier.

When I was at theological college, I fully expected to have my first post in the area I had come from, which had a varied cultural and religious mix. So I learnt as much as I could about Islam, Hinduism and aspects of cross-cultural mission. I was confused by the fact that God chose not to send me there, but to a white working-class council estate in a completely different part of the country. Cross-cultural mission came in very useful, as I tried to discern how to do ministry in an area where the church often fails to make much impression. And given events since 9/11, I wish I

had kept my understanding of Islam more up to date than I have!

Equipping for the future

Several years later I wanted to add to my skills in a way which would equip me for the future, and the options I identified were counselling and teaching adults. Unable to find a short course on teaching adults which fitted with my church role, I opted for a ten week foundation course in counselling which I hoped would augment my previous experience and build on what I had learnt at college. The term coincided with a confusing time of trying to move jobs. The course both helped me as I struggled to see where God was in all this, and equipped me as I moved on to a place where people skills would be important in a variety of ways, and my counselling training would be well used. Then a couple of years later, I had the chance to do a term on teaching adults, which I hoped would help me if, as I believed, God wanted my ministry to have a significant focus on teaching and training. And this has proved to be so.

As women leaders, how do we find an appropriate balance between thinking we can dictate to God how our future will work out, and letting our lives just drift by? Surely the latter is just as unhelpful as the former? Yet if our current leadership responsibilities are tough already, it's easy to muddle on, juggling work and domestic responsibilities, and only occasionally shaken up by a crisis which jolts us into learning new skills.

But it's been shown that the 3% of people who set goals and work out a career-life plan are more effective and successful than others. For Christians, it is part of honouring who we are and being open to all he wants to do through us, that we take time to work with the big picture in mind.

Developing a life vision

So how do women become more intentional about their lives and ministries? One way is through putting together a life vision, a summary of the person God has made us to be and the ways in which he wants us to use our personality, gifts and talents, in a holistic way.

People may say to us, 'I can see you leading a church in five years' time', or 'Have you considered taking X leadership role?' If you have a mentor, she or he may have helped you to think where you might be in a few years' time. Family and friends may have brought you insights; you may have received personal prophecy. All of these are useful, and may become part of your thinking and planning.

One of the most effective ways I've found of focusing on what my future might look like and how I might get there, is to imagine that I was writing about myself in 10 years time, as if I was describing someone else. It took some effort to write in this way, and I only arrived at this stage after reading and praying through a number of themes.

A life vision is simply a tool to help us identify God's priorities for our lives. It is not intended to set aside the Bible, nor subvert grace as the starting point for understanding God's work in our lives. But it can act as a focus for the yearnings, dreams and aspirations, together with what we learn about our gifts and talents, which will enable us to make the most of who God has made us.

How has God SHAPed you?

The first stage of this vision-discerning process may be to take stock of who we are. Many people have found that using the letters SHAPE from Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* help to focus this:

- Spiritual gifts – what God-empowered abilities do I have?
- Heart – what do I love to do? what do I care about most?

- Abilities – what are the things we can't help ourselves doing, the things we've always done well, our talents?
- Personality – what sort of person am I (do I enjoy people or tasks, routine or variety, action or reflection, and so on)?
- Experience – how have the events and experiences of my life shaped me so far?

There is an online version of this tool which you can use, on the CPAS site [here](#). Here it's related to ordained ministry, but the tool can be used independently.

Or we may want to look back on key events in our lives, and tell the story, seeing how God has led us, what we have learnt, and how he might want to take us on from here.

As we come to discern what God's future may look like for us, we need to take stock of our current responsibilities – both in our ministry and in our personal lives. For example, husband, elderly parents, children, friends, wider family.

As we explore and reflect on these aspects of our lives, patterns may emerge. How may these project into the future? If it does not sound too depressing, can you imagine what you'd want someone to say about you in an obituary? How would you like to be remembered? What would you really like to achieve, as God works through you and your ministry? A retreat or quiet day would be a good opportunity to start drawing threads together.

Capturing the vision

How we capture these things in detail is up to us. It may be a picture, a diagram, a list of bullet points or a poem. It should encompass the whole of life: who am I before God, and who does he want he want me to be, spiritually, relationally, professionally, personally, physically and recreationally?

The value of gaining some clarity is that it will help us with that big problem which all leaders face: prioritising. What do we say Yes to and what do we say No to? It's much easier to say No if we have a bigger Yes inside us, one which we have identified and are comfortable with – especially if we are someone whose life has often revolved round saying Yes to others and No to ourselves, our own dreams and our aspirations.

Looking to the future

As you think about the future, and where you think God is leading you, how will you get there? Will you sit back, 'let go and let God'? or will you be proactive? The whole subject of guidance is huge, but I've always found it helpful to see it as both/and rather than either/or. I don't think it's helpful to sit back and wait – and as women perhaps we are more used to being part of someone else's lives, subject to someone else's agenda rather than taking control. Having a vision statement will help us as we look to the future, and use it as a tool to help us to fulfil our God-given dream.

Ultimately our lives are in God's hands, he is in control, but we are not meant to be passive. The saying that it's easier to steer a moving ship than a stationary one has often encouraged me to move ahead. And remember that God says, 'Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "this is the way; walk in it"' (Isaiah 30:21).

As you look to the future, what can you do to move towards it? What skills might you need to acquire? What competencies might you need? What areas of your character need to become more Christ-like? Do you need a mentor or a coach to work with you?

I read recently that 'a goal is a planned conflict with the status quo' (Hyrum Smith). Setting out

our goals and what we'd like to achieve may force us to leave our comfort zones. But if we ask God to guide our steps, set attainable goals for ourselves, and trust that he is equipping us for the future, then we may make the most of who God has made us, and achieve, through him, all that he wants us to do.

Resources

Dan Allender, *To be Told* (Water Brook)

Julie Baker, *A Pebble in the Pond: Leadership Skills Every Woman Can Achieve* (Cook Communications)

Nancy Beach, *Gifted to Lead* (Zondervan)

Katie Brazelton, *Praying for Purpose for Women* (Zondervan)

Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton, *Now Discover Your Strengths* (Simon and Schuster)

Bruce Bugbee, *What You Do Best in the Body of Christ* (Zondervan)

James Lawrence, *Growing Leaders* (BRF)

Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders* (BRF/CPAS)

Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Zondervan)

For more on mentoring, see the articles 'Mentoring for Women Leaders: getting started' and 'Mentoring women leaders'.

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