

# FUTURE-PROOF Your Ministry

Jay Gary, director of the Christian Futures Network, offers five steps you can take to develop a forward view of Christian publishing.

**M**y son is about to turn 16. The day after his birthday he will hand in his permit for a real driver's license. This milestone toward adulthood will occur as our world's odometer turns up three zeros. At the same time, the church will be driving into the future with its eyes glued to the rearview mirror, with little thought to what the 21st century will bring.

Ironically, this focus on the short-term and on crisis management has grown more intense for Christian publishing in recent months. Short-term vision may boost next quarter's earnings, but

hope. By faith he refused to believe that God was finished with the church or society. Although the sun did set on the classical age, Augustine proclaimed, "Christ came when all things were growing old. He made them new."

**L**ike Augustine, we live at the end of an age. The church has walked a hard road through the 20th century wastelands of unchecked nationalism and secularism. We need faith to follow the resurrected Lord of the new day, who stands in the midst of the nations (Psalm 110:3).

The turn of the millennium ought to mean much more than just another year. God invites us to turn away from the deserts of yesterday and toward the promised land. Any step you take ought to be a step in faith affirming that God is leading the church into a new season, and that the new century is God's century.

## *2. Track the trends that will shape the next three decades.*

Until you are able to sift the wheat from the chaff, separate the junk news or fads from the real emerging issues, you will not be able to weigh the risk or opportunities trends bring.

In Christian publishing, two kinds of trends can be tracked. The first deals with publishing as an enterprise in the context of changing technologies and economics. For example, you can ask, "How could digital technologies lower the

entry-barrier to publishing enterprises?" Or as the Internet becomes increasingly multi-lingual, you might ask, "How might this change my consumers' buying habits in the area of books or Christian music?" Both secular and Christian trade publications can help, but you shouldn't stop there. Electronic clipping services and Internet search engines can also help you monitor the changing world of publishing.

A second set of trends for Christian publishers have less to do with business strategy and more with changes in the Church. These can often be identified two to five years in advance. Looking back, it is easy to see how the computer revolution changed our ministry since 1980. Looking forward, how about the coming revolutions in genetic engineering or in nanotechnology? How should publishers anticipate the effect of these innovations, ethically or practically, on the Church? Or, "How will advances in health care extend the lifespan of seniors and their impact on the church and the Christian literature market in the next 20 years?" or "How will growing pluralism change the way the secular market views evangelicals and the gospel?"

## *3. Identify alternative scenarios facing your region.*

The course of the church in the 21st century is not known to us. As always, the future will depend on God's sovereignty, but God's people

## Future-Proofing

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cannot build a ministry for all seasons. Publishers need foresight to respond proactively to the future. How can leaders plan for the next 10, 20 or 30 years? These are five ways to future-proof your ministry.

### *1. Approach the new century in faith.*

Contrary to widespread millennial fear, cultural pessimism is not necessary. After the collapse of Rome, Augustine could have lost

should seek to “understand the times” and know what to do in adverse circumstances.

As a publishing leader, you should consider what alternative scenarios, or contexts your business or ministry might face over the next generation. Scenarios are not predictions. Instead they are a range of composite pictures you sketch, suggesting how you think the world might turn out.

One study on the next quarter century worth reading is entitled *2025: Scenarios of U.S. and Global Society Reshaped by Science and Technology* (Winchester, VA: Oakhill Press, 1997). Futurist Joseph Coates offers 15 well-researched scenarios dealing with households, communications, energy, the environment, lifestyles, etc. Coates charts the likely critical developments in each of these fields by 2025 as well as the unrealized hopes and fears in that sector.

Coates’ scenario, like that of Peter Schwartz in his recent book, *The Long Boom* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1999), might well be called “Market World.” They both envision an age of prosperity, fueled by a “long boom” based on technological and scientific innovation.

But what if “Market World” fails? In *Which World: Global Destinies, Regional Choices* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998), Allen Hammond asks “What if global markets and rapid economic growth do not lift the bulk of humanity out of poverty...might civilization itself unravel to some degree?” The scenario then, according to Hammond would be “Fortress World,” where widening gaps between rich and poor segments of society, between rich and poor nations, preclude any hope of cooperation.

Hammond envisions a third scenario, beyond the singular pursuit of prosperity or a descent into instability and violence. He calls this “Transformed World,” where the power of the civic square, culture, religion and volunteerism temper the power of financial markets and governments. No doubt this third scenario could only come

about through profound revival and social reform.

Beyond these “global destinies,” regional choices come into play. Hammond asks, will Sub-Saharan Africa experience continued tragedy, or transformation? What will Russia and Eastern and Central Europe transition into? Will the Asian economic miracle continue? Will America, Europe and Japan provide leadership or stagnate? Answers to questions like these are critical for developing alternative scenarios to enhance the relevancy of your publishing ministry.

#### *4. Envision all that the Church could be in your society.*

Concerts of Prayer leader David Bryant regularly asks, “Is there more of Christ that God is ready to reveal in and through His Church than we have yet seen or experienced?” What would the Church in your nation look like if, upon seeing the future, it truly experienced biblical renewal?

Six years ago I wrote an inspirational book, entitled *The Star of 2000* (Colorado Springs, CO: Bimillennial Press, 1994), which envisioned what the Church could be from 1999 to 2001. Beyond apocalyptic spirituality or world evangelism deadlines, I envisioned the Church awakening to the Lordship of Christ and marking his 2,000th birthday as a season of jubilee ([www.starof2000.com](http://www.starof2000.com)). The trumpet I blew calling the Church to experience the year 2000 in a Christ-centered way found a great hearing in the Holy Land, but its lack of progress in the peace process hampered its development.

This aspect of charting a prayerful and preferable future for the Church, with respect to our ministries, is a function of a team’s creativity, vision and leadership. We usually express this vision programmatically in our publishing firm’s mission statement. But another way to conceive it is through asking, what is your vision for Christian publishing by 2017,

the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation? Or for the year 2033, when the Church marks the bi-millennial of the Great Commission?

#### *5. Develop your organizational capacity to gather a fuller harvest.*

The fifth “future-proofing” skill is strategic planning. It consists of several elements, including program evaluation, mission statement definition, setting goals and strategies or implementation.

Planning is step number five, rather than number two, because leaders often plan to reach the culture for Christ with a new title, but

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by the time it rolls out 24 months later, the culture has moved. This is why our plans should always be framed in the wider context of forecasting (points 2-4 above).

The Church stands at the doorway of her third millennium. How she walks through that door will depend to a great degree on how well Christian publishers forecast and plan their ministry. May God have grace on us so “that a people not yet created may praise the Lord.” (Psalm 102:18).❖