



In *What Comes Next?*, you'll develop the capacity to guide your organization by shaping the future so that it can thrive. Strategists and innovation experts Nick Skytland & Ali Llewellyn provide a framework for us to lead as futurists and grow our businesses and ministries.

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

[MOODY PUBLISHERS](#) [AMAZON](#) [APPLE BOOKS](#) [GOOGLE PLAY](#) [CHRISTIANBOOK.COM](#) [BARNES & NOBLE](#) 

Contents

Foreword	9
Introduction: An Invitation to Join Us on an Adventure	11
PART 1: NEARSIGHTED	
Chapter 1: The Future Belongs to the Curious	19
Chapter 2: Into the Unknown	27
Chapter 3: The Four Forces	41
Chapter 4: The Eight Intersections	51
PART 2: THE FUTURES FRAMEWORK	
Chapter 5: Identify	61
Chapter 6: Relate	75
Chapter 7: Belong	87
Chapter 8: Gather	97
Chapter 9: Design	109
Chapter 10: Collaborate	123
Chapter 11: Scale	135
Chapter 12: Impact	147
PART 3: FARSIGHTED	
Chapter 13: Curiosity in Action	161
Chapter 14: Paper Rockets	173
Chapter 15: Infinite Possibilities	191
Acknowledgments	195
Notes	199
Futures Framework Worksheet	207

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE CURIOUS

We keep moving forward—opening up new doors and doing new things—because we’re curious. And curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.¹

—WALT DISNEY

It was a cold, foggy October morning in 2000 when NASA astronaut William “Bill” Shepherd waved goodbye to his wife and boarded the bus headed toward the rocket launch area located in the desert steppe in southern Kazakhstan. There was an unspoken tension in the cold air on this historic day.

Bill was joined by two steely-eyed Russian cosmonauts, Yuri Gidzenko and Sergei Krikalev, as they boarded the Soyuz spacecraft. Just a few hours later, they were hurling through the atmosphere, chasing down the International Space Station, orbiting Earth at 17,500 miles per hour.

Ever since that day, humans have continuously lived in space. In its first two decades, the International Space Station has hosted more

than 230 residents from countries around the world. These space explorers have braved hundreds of spacewalks and conducted thousands of research investigations that have led to unparalleled improvements in life on Earth and life in space.²

The pioneers that designed the International Space Station envisioned a future where humans would live permanently in space in an orbiting laboratory that could be built in phases. They then found others who shared their vision for a better future—a future where anything was possible—and were willing to collaborate to make it happen. Today, this miraculous laboratory, one of the most massive structures ever built, is an incredible testimony to what's possible when you envision the future with creativity, ingenuity, and a willingness to dream big.

The International Space Station has had a long and productive life, but NASA and other commercial space partners have started to plan for its retirement to make way for the next chapter in the storied history of human space exploration. What do *you* think humanity should explore next? Where's the next new frontier?

These are tough questions, aren't they? There are innumerable options beyond just returning to the moon or landing humans on Mars. NASA could design a new rocket to go far beyond previous frontiers to a completely new and uncharted destination. On the other hand, our nation could reinvest those funds to address other critical needs that are unrelated to exploration like hunger, poverty, or education. Some question the value of our space program in light of these real issues on Earth, while others fervently believe that these other needs demonstrate the criticality of continuing to explore the universe beyond the one small planet we call home.

As we write this book, NASA is working on another bold vision for the future of human spaceflight. Instead of a laboratory that orbits Earth, they're envisioning a new type of space station that acts more like a spaceship.³ This unique spacecraft will not only orbit Earth but can also be repositioned in orbit around the moon to serve as a home

base and outpost for expeditions to the lunar surface. For the first time in history, humans will build a permanent presence 250,000 miles away from Earth. Could you have envisioned that?

You may not be a rocket scientist tasked with building the next spacecraft to fly to the farthest edges of our solar system, but you are leading an organization, church, or ministry that has a vital mission. You need to think about the future so you can uncover your biases, anticipate changes, avoid surprises, produce more creative options, and identify new opportunities.

As we've already discussed, it's easy to trust in what you can see with your eyes and deduct from your personal experience, but there's far more to be seen when you shift your perspective and walk by faith. We want to help you be a futurist by equipping you with new and creative ways to respond to a changing world around you. This will prepare you to anticipate what will happen next and show you how to use your unique perspective to develop a new set of possibilities, positioning you for the preferred future you want to see. And all of this starts by thinking like a child.

CHILDLIKE CURIOSITY

Kids are often the best futurists. We asked Nick's two elementary-aged sons what they imagined about the future of human space exploration. Like many kids their age, they envision spaceships, not space stations. They foresee us traveling deeper into the galaxy in reconfigurable vehicles that don't just orbit one planet, but that fly around our solar system in pursuit of the next discovery. Neither of them sees any reason to gallivant around our solar system for too long; they would much rather head straight to the farthest edges of the galaxy.

The desire to explore the unknown is innate in almost all of us, especially as children. Kids believe anything is possible. Their youth affords them a perspective of the world that's truly unconstrained. They're innately curious creatures who are born explorers. Without the

same inhibitions that adults have developed over the years, children experiment, dream, and view the world with wonder and imagination.

One of the reasons kids are natural explorers is because they're willing to ask the questions that drive exploration. Even the smallest children unapologetically seek to understand the cause and effect of things around them because they want to understand. Think back on the last time you talked to a child in your life; how many times did they ask why?

We most often see children's curiosity in action when they play. Play is their primary method of discovering themselves and their environment. It's where they feed their curiosity. They figure out how things work without being told and try new things just to see what happens. Kids happily construct cities under an imagined ocean using a box of building blocks, they dream about what it's like to be the president for a day, they sing duets with talking tigers, and they'd love nothing more than to wake up in a bathtub full of gelatin. Creative play gives them a way to make sense of the world around them. Elementary-aged Bill, Sergei, and Yuri—long before they were spacefarers—undoubtedly looked through their telescopes and imagined what might be in the faraway skies.

Unless taught to notice, when children play, they also tend to lack preconceptions and biases. Kids are unselfconscious and happy to try new things. They delight in what they see, touch, and taste, and can enjoy a pillow fort or cardboard-box-turned-airplane as much as the real thing.

As adults, many of us have reined in the freedom we once practiced as children. We've unconsciously trained ourselves to value speed, safety, efficiency, convenience, and consistency. We read business books like *In Search of Excellence* and *Built to Last* that lead with the logic that to be like the other successful companies, we need to emulate those companies. Empirical evidence and certainty are key values.

We rely on answers that require the least work to find. We think it's about finding the right solution, so we spend little time exploring,

playing, and asking our own *why* questions. As a result, we often close ourselves off from hope and possibility. Our rationality shackles our ability to play in an attempt to eliminate ambiguity. Things are happening so rapidly around us that venturing to cast a vision about “what might be” seems an act of futility and folly. There are more questions than answers, and we want the answers now.

Advances in technology help fulfill our need for certainty. Voice-controlled assistants give us immediate answers to almost any question we have. *For how long do you bake cookies? Who discovered Antarctica? What's on the calendar for tomorrow? How many astronauts are in space?* But, while our lives may feel easier and more defined, we slowly lose our ability to search, wonder, and uncover understanding through discovery. We become reticent and unable to envision a future beyond the here and now.

But what if we learned to think and play like children again? Imagine what would be possible if you could see the world as kids do: without limitations, preconceptions, bias, fear, self-consciousness, or isolation. You can.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME YOU PICKED UP A KALEIDOSCOPE?

Like children, grown-up explorers have a pioneering spirit and intrinsic curiosity that help them journey into the unknown. With boldness and inquisitiveness, they navigate new frontiers, even when the future is blurry or opaque. They aren't deterred when they can't see beyond the horizon . . . instead, they're often even more intrigued.

You too can be an explorer with the ability to dream and envision what's on the other side of the obstacles, challenges, and cultural realities you face. The future belongs to the curious, and by considering and changing your perspective, this can include you.

One of our favorite tools to help you deepen your field of vision is a kaleidoscope. Kaleidoscopes have been around since the 1800s.

You may remember the first time you peered through the faceted and prism-like lens of one as a child. Light bounced off ordinary objects in the room and refracted through the lens to produce wondrous and intricate designs. Whether you used a simple homemade tube filled with beads, strings, and paper clips, or a higher-end prism adorned with colored plastic, glass, or marbles, the angled mirrors allowed you to change the view with every twist.

While generations of people have had this experience, no one has ever viewed two identical images. Despite the simplicity of such a low-tech device, it produces an infinite array of beautiful possibilities. We love kaleidoscopes because they combine the beauty of stained-glass windows, the majesty of sunsets, and the surprise of fireworks. The unique design of kaleidoscopes provides new and unusual visual experiences, particularly in environments where darkness and uncertainty surround bright light. While it's disorienting at first, the simple method of combining light and movement in new ways gives the viewer an enhanced field of vision.

Not only that, but kaleidoscopes also serve as connectors that prompt us to see and think differently. Artist Judith Paul put it this way: "The kaleidoscope takes a controlled section of chaos; the mirror system converts it into patterns, and the human mind loves patterns. The right brain wants beauty and art; the left brain wants order. The kaleidoscope is science and art, both."⁴ So much more than a child's toy, kaleidoscopes represent that linkage of the left and right brain that serves as a bridge between thinking/feeling and sensing/intuition. They acknowledge the reality in the world around us, but expand our field of view by playfully giving us an endless array of permutations.

Spurred on by our desire to shape the future in an ever-changing world, we developed a systematic approach based on the kaleidoscope to help us anticipate what's next. We call it the Futures Framework and it looks at the ordinary world through a structure that acts like a kaleidoscope, allowing us to see the world in a new and beautiful way. We believe it can help YOU think about the future too.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO SEE THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY

The rest of this book is your opportunity to pick up our kaleidoscope and, with each turn of it, see fresh possibilities for your future. With enough twists, we'll show you how to combine these insights into a clearer vision of the future. We'll then show you, based on that clarity, how to realize that future in a structured, systematic, and actionable way.

Here's what you can expect going forward. In chapter 2, we discuss our shared problem of having limited vision and how we can correct it with futures thinking. We then introduce you in chapter 3 to the four forces that are stirring uncertainty in the world. These forces are continually at work to keep your vision obscured, and we share how recognizing them can help you navigate the chaos around you. In chapter 4, we introduce you to the Futures Framework and use it in chapters 5–12 to teach you how to identify your preferred future. In chapters 13–15, we tie the whole thing together by showing you how to develop an actionable strategy to realize that preferred future.

We were created for vision. Without it, we lose our restraint and our hope (Prov. 29:18). Just as studying history helps us avoid repeating past mistakes, peering into the future from a different perspective unlocks and informs a whole new realm of opportunities. We're confident that as you change your view, your vision will grow. You'll uncover new patterns and see things in entirely new ways; that, in itself, is the first step to creating a different future. Let's get started!



NEXT STEPS

1. Do you have a great memory from when you were a child and were free to play? What stands out to you about it?
2. Have you ever used a kaleidoscope? What did you enjoy about the experience?
3. Are you first drawn to science and order, or art and beauty? How does that influence how you approach your work?
4. Does vision come easily to you? What environments or relationships bring out the vision in your heart?
5. What frontier is still unexplored for you, personally or professionally?

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Deep seemed the valleys when we lay between the reeling seas.¹

—SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON

One of our favorite adventurers is Ernest Shackleton, a polar explorer who led four British expeditions to the Antarctic. Shackleton is best known for his successful failure.

As the story goes, at the turn of the twentieth century, the world was in a polar frenzy. Whoever became the first person to cross the uncharted Arctic landscape was guaranteed unprecedented fame and fortune. It was a time in history now known as the “Heroic Age” of polar exploration when these pioneers set out to conquer desolate and forbidding lands.

Financed by the billionaires of the time, and bolstered by public support, polar exploration was the old-fashioned equivalent of space exploration today. Nations competed with each other, vying to conquer dangerous new frontiers and stake territorial claims. It was also an era of technological advancement and innovation. The tools of exploration included ships designed to brave the unforgiving Arctic ice and capable of withstanding the extreme cold. Even today, a journey across Antarctica is one of the harshest tests a human being can endure.

Shackleton was one of many who aspired to this greatness. In search of scientific knowledge, as well as glory, he set off in 1914 to cross Antarctica from the Weddell Sea to McMurdo Sound in the Ross Sea, via the South Pole. The total distance of the expedition was a formidable 1,800 miles.² It was a feat that no other explorer before him had yet accomplished—and for good reason. It was an incredible journey, especially in the early 1900s, and one that challenged all the preconceptions of the time.

Unfortunately, the passage didn't go the way Shackleton planned. He began the voyage with a mission of exploration, but it quickly became a mission of survival. His ship, *The Endurance*, became trapped in an ice floe overnight, surrounded by pinnacles of ice far taller than its sides. He and his crew ultimately abandoned it. His team ended up stranded on Elephant Island, 350 miles further north toward South America, with nearly no hope of rescue. Shackleton became a hero when he led a small party on an unbelievable rescue mission into Chile, ultimately returning four months later to rescue the rest of his crew.

A JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN

You may relate to Ernest Shackleton. As a leader, you also have a weighty responsibility to navigate your team through the chaotic world around you to a better future. You set off on this journey when the sky was blue, when your crew was ready to board, and when you all shared confidence that you were heading in the right direction—but then everything changed. The vessel that was supposed to help you successfully circumnavigate a continent is now frozen solid in the ice. The hurricane-force winds swirling around are unrelenting, and help is nearly a thousand miles away. You aren't even sure how you got yourself into this situation. It all happened so quickly. You know you have to do something, but you just aren't sure what to do.

You aren't alone. As we've worked with leaders of organizations, churches, and ministries to help them navigate the unknown future,

we've heard many similar stories. We're usually called right after the ship has been stuck in the ice, and the crew is without hope. What we've found in these situations is that we can all benefit from understanding how, even after the shipwreck, Shackleton continued to defy the odds against him.

Shackleton's journey started as a grand mission of fame, glory, and scientific endeavor. So, if we judge the success of it by these objectives, his mission was a colossal failure. His ship never reached Antarctica, and his crew never set foot on the continent. The expedition strained Shackleton's finances to a breaking point, and the accomplishments he did achieve were eventually eclipsed by the unfolding of World War I shortly after that. Yet if we stop with the failure of his well-planned objectives, we miss something important about Shackleton.

What's truly unique about him is that no matter what challenges he encountered, he continued to envision a better future and went after it unrelentingly. It's unlikely that before Shackleton departed on his journey, he imagined the disasters he would face, but when these setbacks and hardships did occur, he wasn't willing to accept the future that fate tried to hand him.

His commitment to a larger purpose allowed him to see alternatives where others couldn't. Faced with the seemingly impossible, Shackleton was open-minded in the face of enormous adversity. He imagined how his current circumstances could evolve into any number of possibilities over time, and then with unwavering courage and forbearance, he worked to overcome the chaos. When his expedition encountered serious trouble, Shackleton reinvented the crew's goals. Each time the environment changed, and his plans failed, he adjusted. His willingness to persevere through continually changing circumstances helped him get to that better future.

OUR BLURRY VISION

Ernest Shackleton's story could have ended quite differently. He could have suffered from a common condition called *nearsightedness*. Nearsightedness is simply the inability to focus on objects far away. You can think of it as being "shortsighted" or as having "tunnel vision," resulting in the inability to see beyond your present circumstances.

Nearsightedness isn't a new phenomenon. Scripture reminds us that it's been part of the human condition for as long as we've explored our planet. In Deuteronomy, God gave Moses a song to teach the Israelites because He knew they were nearsighted and would forget His faithfulness in the future. The lyrics include, "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deut. 32:18). And, in 2 Peter, Scripture exhorts us to remember the importance of living out godly characteristics such as self-control and steadfastness. Peter writes, "For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins" (2 Peter 1:9).

Another notable example in Scripture where God calls His people to a God-sized future beyond what they can see in front of them is Genesis 12:1–3. Abraham is given a promise that seems impossible: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Yet after God reveals this promise in chapter 12, we see just three chapters later that Abram is still struggling to have vision for the future that God had promised him. God, in His patience, filled in the picture and invited Abram to believe in a bigger future than he thought possible. The only way he could see a future was to have a male descendant, which Abram didn't have. God told him not to fear or to seek a backup plan, but that he would have offspring that numbered the stars. Abram "believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

It's so easy for us to have limited vision. We are quick to see only what's in front of our eyes and fail to participate in the promises God has planned for us in the future. Where there's no vision, the people perish, says Proverbs 29:18.

If Shackleton had been nearsighted when his ship became ice-locked, he might have been overcome with the enormity of the challenge ahead of him. Instead of persevering, he may have given up when faced with such an uncertain future. He would have likely failed to adjust his goals or to convince his crew to work together for a common cause. Shackleton's team might have died from cold, famine, and scurvy, as they each worked to preserve their own comfort and safety. And, you wouldn't be reading about him today because his voyage would have been long forgotten as one of many polar tragedies.

If we're honest with ourselves as leaders, we're all more nearsighted than we want to admit. Given the volatile and uncertain world we live in, many of us have difficulty stepping back and gaining perspective. With all of our responsibility to address the urgencies of our present crises, even the most well-intentioned of us are tempted to stop where we are. Instead of envisioning a better future, the immediate goal of managing risk today, improving our resilience, and safeguarding the longevity of our organization, church, or ministry takes precedence. It's easy to maintain the status quo when we're faced with ambiguity and limited resources.

Our blurry vision stems from how we usually think about the future. Since it hasn't happened yet, we don't have an easily accessible framework for our thoughts or feelings about it. When we think about life one day or one week from now, we can generate concrete and specific images. We can predict more details about tomorrow than we can about next year. The reality is, though, "that people tend to think abstractly as they ponder the distant future."³ The further out we go, the less certainty we have. For example, have you ever been in a job interview where they asked you, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" What would you say? "Feel fulfilled. Be happy. Work less, and play more. Make a differ-

ence.” It’s a standard question that’s often hard to answer well.

Yet, most of us want to know what happens next. We’re wired for it. Whether it’s the next significant development in our industry or the end of a good book we’re only halfway through, we want to see the direction before us. We wonder how we will keep up with others who seem to be constantly innovating and how we will navigate the treacherous sea that presents more obstacles with every storm. But since we can’t know the future with certainty, we often revert to the one thing we know the best: the past. Learning from the past is critical, but as we recount the mistakes we don’t want to repeat, we may unconsciously reinforce the assumptions and biases of our past that keep us there. This can make it hard to move forward. Even more concerning, when we only take our cues from history, we may miss out on the innovations and new approaches that are possible.

A classic example given at almost every talk on innovation is the Eastman Kodak Company. They invented the first digital camera but were unable to see the potential of the growing digital photography revolution beyond the company’s core business assumptions. To its ultimate detriment, Kodak was so blinded by its past success and the apparent strength of the status quo that it failed to shift away from film manufacturing and alter its strategy. It’s a timeless reminder for all of us that we need to revolutionize our industry before someone, or something, else does.

As we work with leaders, we have yet to talk with one who dreams about a future where their organization closes shop, their ministry goes bankrupt, or their church slowly fades out of existence. No one wants to join Kodak as another victim overcome by the disruptive power of innovation. Instead, all of the leaders we’ve interacted with have envisioned a better future—and the same is probably true of you. But just because you can imagine it, doesn’t mean you necessarily know how to make it happen, especially when your longer-term vision, destination, or outcome meets human limitations, assumptions based on the past, or external factors that inevitably interrupt your course.

You need more than a gut feeling or ethereal sense about where you're heading to lead others into the unknown future. And, while it's not possible to predict the outcome with absolute certainty, not thinking about the future doesn't help either. Within these pages, it's our goal to help you correct your nearsightedness so you get specific about what you want the distant future to look like and, as a result, lead others well.

THE ANTIDOTE TO OUR NEARSIGHTEDNESS

So how can you address your nearsightedness? The solution is straightforward: You need something to shift your perspective and to stretch your visual field to new places. You need a new lens to give you better vision. This is where futures thinking comes in. It's the perfect antidote to nearsightedness and applies to all areas of life, including education, space travel, city planning, or small group ministry.

Do you remember how we talked about kaleidoscopes in the last chapter? Well, futures thinking is like putting on a brand-new pair of kaleidoscope glasses. The approach helps you systematically consider what comes next through a particular set of lenses to foresee a range of possibilities, identify options, plan, and shape the future. The purpose of futures thinking isn't to answer the question of what *will* happen. Instead, its focus is what *could* happen and what that means for your organization, church, or ministry. It can stimulate conversation, widen your understanding of what might be possible, strengthen your leadership, and inform your decision making. Rather than waiting for change to happen to you, it gives you a chance to proactively navigate your reality in the direction you want to go.

Futures thinking is by no means a recent development. It emerged during the Enlightenment, and grew throughout the 1900s with experiments in forecasting and systems operations. Since then, it's become well-established as an academic discipline and a business approach to navigate what lies ahead and develop creative new strategies to reduce

uncertainty and lessen the risk of failure.⁴ Systems mapping and scenario planning evolved to help leaders like you understand more complex dynamics and create space to consider what seems currently unthinkable.

You can use futures thinking as a way of inspecting your beliefs, habits, and processes. It can help you reveal your assumptions, break free of your constraints, and reevaluate what's possible, even with the limitations of your current policies, practices, and processes. Changing your perspective can reveal gaps between today and tomorrow where you can apply innovation. It can also help you identify the areas where the current successful practices should scale up to have the most significant impact.

Futures thinking allows you to reflect meaningfully on the changes that may occur in the next few decades so you can do something meaningful about them. It's important to remember, though, that you can't know the definitive future; only God knows that with certainty. But you can use discipline and discernment to listen to Him and prompt you along alternative paths. By knowing your God-given identity and purpose, you can have a plumb line that helps you see the possibilities, recognize His voice as you hear it, and keep your navigation accurate in the storm. "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps" (Prov. 16:9). The goal with futures thinking is not to be right about the specific future but to be prepared for the future because you helped create it.

WHY THE FUTURE IS PLURAL

As we talked about earlier, it's easy to think about the trajectory of any future event in a linear fashion. However, the future rarely emerges predictably. Just think about the stock market, the result of political elections, the latest pandemic, the unfolding of almost any historical event, or the future of the church. Human affairs are neither predictable nor deterministic, no matter how certain they appear at one moment in time. Even though it's tempting to try to anticipate one "correct" future,

thinking about the future isn't about being able to define what's going to happen precisely. There isn't just one possible future.

Therefore, when contemplating what's next, it's appropriate to think in terms of "futures"—and that's what futures thinking does. If you took a course on it at a university or attended an online workshop, you would learn a simple construct that includes three key elements: the expected future, the preferred future, and the alternative future.

We can portray any situation or opportunity as having many possible futures. So, these three elements include all of the scenarios we can imagine—some more realistic and probable than others. We can use these approaches as a way to prepare our organization, church, or ministry for change and for us to start to take action.⁵ The more we explore various scenarios, the more we can reduce blind spots, minimize risks, and encourage more innovative thinking. So, let's take a closer look at what the expected future, preferred future, and alternative future might include.

THE EXPECTED FUTURE

The future most of us are familiar with is what we call the expected future. It's what comes to mind first and is often based on historical analogy or extrapolation of your current situation. As we all learned in science class as kids, inertia keeps objects moving in the same direction and the same velocity unless acted on by an outside force. Your expected future is the one you will predictably encounter if no external force intervenes.

Consider your life. If nothing were to change in the next five years, what do you expect to happen? You may still live in the same house, on the same street, and be part of the same team, company, and community. You'll likely frequent the same coffee shop, while you drive the same route to and from work. If you are honest about it, this is what you all too often anticipate will happen, right? It's the expected future.

Take the declining rates of church attendance in the United States,

especially among young people. An unprecedented number of post-millennial young adults do not identify as Christians. Many consider themselves “nones,” and affiliate with “none of the above” religious traditions. We’d expect that in the future, given all we know now, that this would continue.

The expected future is heavily influenced by our expectations, our stereotypes, and our life experience. We tend to resist change naturally, and the longer we persist in the status quo, the harder it is to get out of that status quo. But that’s why you’re reading this book: you aren’t sitting around waiting for the expected future.

THE POSSIBLE FUTURES

Futures thinking requires thinking about more than just the expected future. You also need to examine the full realm of possible futures to identify other unforeseen alternatives.

It’s helpful to treat the future as a set of possible outcomes rather than focusing on one specific future that is most probable. To do this, you need to be conscious of the factors that limit your understanding of the future. You have to be aware of your lack of information and what you don’t know. Doing this includes considering the possibility of incorrect theories (what each of us thinks we know but don’t get right) and unexamined assumptions (what we believe we know but don’t reconsider).

As you continue to question, examine, and reconsider your assumptions, you’ll discover more possible alternatives. These alternatives may seem more speculative and harder to develop because they’re influenced by so many different factors, with varying degrees of plausibility. Developing possible futures is a hard task because of the *unknown unknowns*. These are situations that are so unexpected and unforeseeable that you cannot even conceivably consider them based on experience or your best investigation. Who could have imagined a global pandemic that forced churches, schools, and organizations around the world to chal-

lunge their assumptions about gathering digitally, almost overnight? While few anticipated this, it took months to fully appreciate the depth of change caused by this unknown unknown.

One way to anticipate the future in a constantly changing and uncertain world is to develop alternative futures. You can do this quickly by collaborating with people who are different from you. Intentionally bringing together various viewpoints combines the perspectives of people from diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences to create something that none of you could have created alone. This type of collaboration allows you to change your vantage point and discover hidden variables that you were unable to see from your earlier perspective.

Although we might not have been able to predict when a global pandemic would occur, we could have proactively envisioned a future where churches met online and didn't require a building. We also could have rethought how we approach missions so that we're planning trips to meet the needs we see in the digital world just as we work to address the needs in a physical world. Rather than wait to be disrupted, we can choose to innovate and be prepared. Shifting our perspective and questioning our assumptions allows us to generate alternative futures that will undoubtedly unlock new possibilities for your organization, church, or ministry.

THE PREFERRED FUTURE

The preferred future is the one that you most desire. It's the vision of a better world that you would like to see and is the end state you're working toward with intention. By using this simple classification, futures thinking helps you imagine potential future scenarios that can help you gain knowledge, understand your situation better, and evaluate information about the future more systematically, to influence it.

When you're clear about your preferred future, it allows you to shift the conversation toward the best way to get there. For example, if we put it in the context of church attendance, the preferred future

might be that we prefer that *everyone* attends church and develops a personal relationship with Christ that they live out in community with others. This may not necessarily require meeting in a building, or even gathering in a physical place. Having a vision for what the preferred future could be and mobilizing your organization, church, or ministry to achieve that vision is the fundamental responsibility of all leaders.

You can think about the future on a variety of different scales (global, national, local) and over a range of time frames (near-term, middle-term, distant). If you don't consider what might happen in the future far enough into the future, the results can be too aligned with current trends and tend to support ideas that build within these trends incrementally rather than disrupting them completely.

LOOKING TOWARD HEAVEN

One of the main differences between taking a class in futures thinking and reading this book is that we offer a gospel-driven framework and consider the future from a Christian worldview. This book is a guide for leaders like you, who are bringing the unchanging gospel to a changing world. As you navigate your organization, congregation, and ministry through this uncertainty, your primary aim is to usher in a future that is aligned with the purpose, vision, and calling God has placed on your heart.

In the Lord's Prayer, we're instructed to pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). For all of us who follow Christ, heaven is our preferred future. It's the ultimate destination, the grandest of all possibilities, and the perfect example of the result of futures thinking. We want heaven to be the future that shapes where we're going from where we are now. None of us have been there yet, but we believe that God has given us direction and insight to get past what we can't see with our natural eyes and help us shape our *now* with the promise of *then*.

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

AMAZON 

APPLE BOOKS 

GOOGLE PLAY 

BARNES & NOBLE 

CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 