



GET READY

Churches have done exceptionally well in responding to the pandemic, but with much uncertainty and change on the horizon, responding doesn't go far enough, **Dr Tom Sine** and **Dr Dwight Friesen** tell Naomi Osinnowo.

Diligent and determined, church and Christian leaders in the UK quickly adapted amid the challenges created by the coronavirus pandemic.

Anecdotal evidence as well as research have revealed that when church and office doors shut at the end of March, new ways of operating, serving, helping and ministering were promptly underway.

For Dr Tom Sine and Dr Dwight Friesen, authors of *2020s Foresight*, the rapid response both here and in the US, where they're based, to the crisis has been commendable. Leaders and their congregations or teams have stepped up to meet needs and stepped in to fill gaps, all the while ensuring that the word of God continues to be preached and taught.

But as the west moves further into restoration phase, still with much uncertainty ahead, Tom, who has worked with churches and non-profits for 30 years to enable them to anticipate and creatively respond to new challenges in tough times, and Dwight, a theology lecturer

at the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, urge leaders and the wider Christian community to rethink their modus operandi. They believe that if the church "simply lives in action", we will not be able to adequately express the love of God to a host of new challenges that are coming our way in the decade ahead.

"Church leaders care very deeply about their communities, but in seminary they are rarely trained in how to either anticipate change or broadly research best practices. For example, every major corporation has a plan to deal with the next recession. I have never come across a church or a denomination that has a plan in advance to deal with the next recession," says Tom.

Simply living in action and not planning ahead will fail the church and those we seek to serve, Tom and Dwight explain during our chat over Zoom one Friday evening. They say that these are turbulent times, with COVID-19, the recent race-related protests and the climate crisis, not to mention the growing number of people in Britain and the US in our

neighbourhoods who don't have enough income to sustain themselves. And this, they feel, is likely to be a growing need in many of our communities.

Dwight puts it like this: "As Christians we believe we're part of a story – God's unfolding story. There's always a past, a present and a future. Traditionally, most Christians focus on the past (scripture and our respective traditions) or the present (living and serving), but seldom dutifully consider the future, with the exception of eschatology, and more specifically an eternity with God as our final destination. But if we're to be faithful to our neighbours, we're to learn to anticipate what is coming our way and do something about it now.

"There's an invitation to follow Christ by anticipating what's coming; we're not to think it's always going to be like it is now or how it was yesterday. Long after the health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has been resolved, for instance, the economic crisis will linger. The economic impact is just beginning to be felt, meaning we have time to activate through a new

set of practices and establish in advance a tapestry of care that will make our communities more resilient in future.”

Time to change tack?

Anticipation, reflection, innovation – these are the three vital practices, or the new “three-step dance” as they put it, Tom and Dwight recommend church and Christian leaders now use to underpin their strategic planning. This, they say, will enable them and those they work with to thrive and be effective witnesses to Christ in a decade which is likely to be characterised not only by change, but accelerating change.

In their study book *2020s Foresight* they explain that to anticipate is to look ahead and consider “how new issues are likely to face those you work with in the next five to 10 years”. They write: “We encourage you to anticipate how the context is likely to change in the coming decade, not only for those you serve, but also for your church or organization. Take a cue from business innovators, urban planners, and environmental designers, who use the step of anticipating to identify new challenges and opportunities before they start planning.”

To reflect is to think deeply about “the aspirations and biblical values of your faith”. They write: “Many faith leaders tell us that too often they assume that their theological or ethical values will automatically permeate their group’s planning. However, we need to recognize that it can be very easy to lose track of the powerful undercurrent of popular culture and market forces subtly shaping even our ‘Christian planning.’”

And, last, to innovate is to “spend time and resources broadly researching best practices in your respective fields – before you start planning”. They write: “As a consequence of research, leaders are able to harvest a broad range of innovative ideas from all over the planet. When they see a major new challenge racing toward them, they already have a reservoir of innovative responses to draw on.”

Dwight clarifies that *2020s Foresight* is written so it puts some very practical steps in the hands of people who can actually do the work. “It provides tools and encourages Christians to listen to their context and anticipate the future needs. You can innovate creative and appropriate responses in your context. This book is a key resource for this time – a time many of us feel lost because times are changing so fast,” he says.

Excerpt from *2020s Foresight: Three Vital Practices for Thriving in a Decade of Accelerating Change*

CHAPTER 1

Doing the Three-Step in Birmingham

Looking back on this New Parish Conference in 2017, it was easily the most memorable workshop Tom had experienced in recent years. This was due largely to the skillful leadership of Mike Royal. It occurred to Tom that Mike Royal was leading in a process very much like the three-step dance we are proposing in this book:

Step One

Mike helped workshop participants anticipate how their neighbors would likely be impacted by the coming economic cutbacks.

Step Two

Mike enabled these neighbors who were divided politically to reflect on their biblical responsibility to their most vulnerable neighbors.

Step Three

Mike enabled the leaders to use a creative process to innovate new ways for their churches to help empower neighbors before the cutbacks came.

This three-step dance in Birmingham could impact communities all over Britain facing cutbacks in the early 2020s. Now let’s fast forward to 2020. Boris Johnson has been elected as the new Prime Minister of the UK and he plans to push Brexit through in one year. However, ‘Boris Johnson’s own official government figures show Brexit will make British people much poorer.’ No sooner had President Trump been acquitted of impeachment by the US Senate on February 5, 2020, than the Democrats made a stumbling beginning in the presidential race in Iowa. The outcome of this election will not only have an impact on the American people, but people all over our planet in this time of accelerating change.

In *2020s Foresight*, Tom and Dwight use three steps (anticipation, reflection, innovation) to show Christian leaders how to research a much broader array of innovative ways to respond to new challenges in times like these. Then they show readers how to select those creative responses that most fully reflect the ways of Jesus.

With questions at the end of each chapter, the book can be used as a study book in churches, colleges or seminaries. If you plan ahead, Tom and Dwight might be available to make a Zoom visit to your study group. Contact Tom at twsine@gmail.com.