Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition

by Alan J Roxburgh

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

For strategic planning, there are three mistakes churches can make. Firstly, in modern church growth made churches can assume vision is all about numbers—especially bums, backs and buildings as we hope for more people, larger budgets and flashier facilities. But when we go to Scripture for vision, our imaginations are more likely to be captured primarily by vision for forming disciples, growing leaders and sending missionaries to grow the Kingdom of God.

A second mistake is to expect we can just set forty years goals, and that we know what the world will be like in five years time. The reality is, as Alan Roxburgh reminds his readers, we live in a changing world. The future is not predictable and controllable in the modern strategic planning assumes. It is good to fix our directions, but we need to be open to adjustments. It is good to look for maps to guide us, but we are more likely to need to draw the maps ourselves than get others to make maps for us. In this part of his book, he critiques reliance on strategic planning for churches and explains why it is less reliable today and less appropriate for discerning God’s purposes. He warns that maps built in modernity around strategic planning simply lead us to see the need for mission as the need for more and better technology, change, globalization, pluralism and the democratisation of knowledge. People are not looking for a top-down master plan to follow, but are as much waiting for vision and these blossoms up from grassroots involvement.

The second half of Missional Map-Making explores how this does not stop strategic planning altogether. But instead of starting with organisational audits, mission statements, vision plans and alignment discussions, Roxburgh counsels four foundational steps to help a group discern and join in with what God is up to.

Firstly, Roxburgh says assess how the environment has changed in your context. We need to understand about globalisation, urbanisation, postmodernism, pluralism, secularisation, technology, youth movements and overwhelming global needs. Everyone in our congregations may not know what all those trends mean, but we do dream and plan in terms of what we need to understand what is happening in the world around us and how our organisation is changing.

Secondly, Roxburgh says focusing on redeveloping a core identity. By this he does not mean edit a one line mission statement but to redefine our identity in the Christian story. He encourages churches to deeply engage the biblical narrative, and to listen to God and consider where God is inviting us to continue that story. In our local context at Auckland, we are looking forward to an enhanced teaching series that will take us through different aspects of our biblical story, culminating in what God is inviting us towards here today. Roxburgh says: To cultivate a people in our local churches who are asking questions about what the Spirit is up to in our neighbours’ church where people feel safe enough and encouraged to learn to listen to God and one another as a basic habit of their lives. (p. 137). Missional map-making, therefore, relies more on spiritual formation and cultivating a prayer and openness to leading Scripture (and having Scripture ‘read us’), than relying on strategic planning as a starting point.

Thirdly, Roxburgh suggests creating a parallel culture. In this step his emphasis on spiritual formation continues. Alongside whatever else we do at church, a parallel culture will cultivate the practices and habits of what is at the heart of Christian living.

In our church we are currently calling this the Aucklandity, and it might include some of the practices Roxburgh suggests. None of its recent science or new. But practices hospitality, solitude and prayer, Sabbath, sharing belongings, Scripture reading, lifelong learning, serving the poor and welcoming strangers are practices that will help us discern where our church is connecting us and where God is inviting us to be transformed in new directions.

Fourthly, Roxburgh argues it is critical to form partnerships with surrounding neighbourhoods and communities. Listening conversations and dialogue have potential for churches to discern where God may be calling them. The great reality of the church is that the Spirit, God’s imagination for the future is already among God’s people, and so the work of leadership is in the cultivation of the environment that will allow this imagination to gather energy. (p. 179). Roxburgh says the imagination and vision for a new direction is already here in God’s people. And God is already in the process to teach us more than we know about our community. As we listen to one another and to the experiences of our community, we will be able to offer leadership that is not pretending to know what the future holds but who will create new maps for our future as it unfolds. For example, a formative story at AucklandLife for our approach to planning and formation is of Clare and Brian. This young couple looked up the church on people and came in one morning. Despite their fears they would not be welcomed because of their different religious and cultural background. But they found a warm community, seen given Bible, invited to a family’s home for Christmas, asked if they could study with the Bible with us, and in the midst of an Alpha course discovered faith for themselves. They chose to be baptized at time their families could see, as a witness to them. They made a vocational and volunteering decisions based on their discernment of who God had made them to be and where Jesus was calling them. Within a year they moved cities, which really felt too short for us as a church. But realised people on their journeys will only be with us for a time, and we need to make the most of the people in their spiritual formation while they are with us. This story helps form our vision for everyone who is with us, short-term or long-term, young or old, that we would work with God to form people as disciples, grow them as leaders, and send one another as missionaries.

As we listen to one another and move with the rhythms and needs of our community, there will be planning we need to do. But this book is a helpful corrective for me and anyone else who might tend to get hung up on the right words in our mission statement or in which years aim to define in decade by. Missional Map-Making critiques the strategic-planning churches often commence with, and practically outlines steps for congregational formation that are found in classical spiritual disciplines of Bible engagement and discernment. It is a valuable manual for pastors, leadership teams and congregational consultants.

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