



Daring to Think Forward in a Time of Accelerating Change

By [Dwight J. Friesen](#) And [Ann A. Michel](#) On August 31, 2021

How can churches get ahead of the curve by learning to anticipate change rather than always responding to change after the fact?

Ann Michel interviews Dwight Friesen about how to cultivate the imagination and skill set needed to think forward.

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Ann Michel: Your book is built around the premise that in a time of rapid and accelerating change churches need to anticipate changes rather than always responding after the fact. Can you speak to this premise?

Dwight Friesen: So often when churches begin to do strategic planning or think missionally about their calling, they actually fail to look to the future and anticipate the changes that are coming their way. Those of us who seek to follow in the way of Jesus generally hold to a narrative understanding of the universe. We believe in a God who is creator and an eschatological path where God is bringing all things into the new creation or God's dream for us. The narrative begins with creation. Then there is a rupture in creation. Then God restores things, ultimately in Jesus Christ. And finally, we have the eschatological vision. We're really good at telling the parts of the story that look to the past and invite us to the present. We have not so much fostered the skill set of thinking about the future part of the story. Every story has a past, present, and future component to it. And part of what it means to love our neighbors well is to help them anticipate the changes and challenges that are going to come their way so they're not blindsided when there are hit by something that they actually could have planned for.

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We can't predict the future. We can't be prophets. We can't know everything that's coming our way. But a lot of data is actually floating around out there. You can see it in the newsprint or the news feed on your phone. It helps us imagine what's coming down the road. Take climate change as an example. Whether a person believes it or not, we're seeing changes. What can we do now to listen to those changes and plan accordingly? Part of loving our neighbors is helping them prepare well. Part of loving our faith communities is helping them prepare well. Part of loving our kids is helping them prepare well for the future. We can't predict what's coming their way, but we have a pretty good sense of what might happen. So, how can we help them get there in a way that's wise and loving? That's what this book is really about. Not just responding but trying to anticipate.

Ann Michel: If a church leadership team is given the task of trying to anticipate the changes that are on the horizon in the next five to 10 years — that's the time frame you talk about in the book, just how does the church get a window into that future? I know there's no crystal ball. But what are some of the means and mechanisms that churches can use to anticipate what is coming?

Dwight Friesen: Truly, you don't need to become a professional forecaster to do this. There are lots of forecasting methods out there. Tom and I draw on the skill set of what's called probability forecasting. But I don't need to get into the technical side of that. If your leadership team is doing a retreat or planning at your regular meetings, you literally just ask the people in your group to brainstorm some of the things they're hearing about that are likely to impact themselves, their neighborhood, our country, or the world in the next five to 10 years. No data. Just brainstorm a list of things that are likely to impact how we live day to day. Fill your whiteboard. Fill another whiteboard. People already have an imagination. They've heard things. They've thought things. They can feel things.

The Spirit of God is already daring people to imagine what the future's going to look like so they can prepare themselves. All we have to do is begin to listen to those things. Once you have that list, you can ask, "Given where we are as people and a faith community, given the resources we have, given the particularity of our locatedness, which of these things are most likely to impact us directly?" I think that's a really good starting place. It's not the only question to ask, but it's a really good one. I just heard a news report of a farming community in Southern California really impacted by drought. Imagine that faith community saying, "Over the next few years, we need to anticipate a continuing drought and continuing difficulty for our crops." Then, the question is: If this is happening right in our backyard, what's the invitation here? God isn't caught off guard by these changes and ruptures. It's part of reality. So, where and how could this be an invitation for us to actually discover a way of love? The goal is to pay attention to what might be there. What could we do? How might we begin?

Ann Michel: In the book, you mention a lot of trends — climate change, increasing diversity, polarization, and information and technological advances. Are these the kind of changes that a local congregation should focus on in doing this work?

Dwight Friesen: I would hesitate to be prescriptive about that. The primary skill set we highlight throughout our book is deep listening. There's not an assumption or a prescriptive message around what one must do. The questions are: Who are you as

an individual? Who are you as a community? Where are you? And how might your neighbors and your neighborhood need to experience the love of Jesus through you? It's far more particular. It's far more located. It almost intentionally rejects the trends on the national stage or hyped by the media. Instead, it says, "Let's listen to our neighborhood closely. Let's listen to those right around us." That's the ongoing dare from Jesus. He said the way you demonstrate your love of God is by loving your neighbor as yourself. So, how do you do that with a future orientation? How do we help people listen to the future so they're not blindsided by it?

Ann Michel: So, it's hyperlocal and community based.

Dwight Friesen: It really is. That's the best way to go. Here's a fun example that didn't make it into the book. Morgan Schmidt is a youth pastor at a Presbyterian Church in North Bend. She's always had a bulletin board in their youth room with two simple questions. *What do you have? And what do you need?* The simple invitation was, if you have something extra to share, post it. And if you need something, post that request. This built the capacity to give and receive and it created a culture of sharing within their youth group and young adult ministry. When the pandemic hit and they couldn't access their building, she went online with these questions and created a Facebook group. And over the course of three or four months, they activated over 10,000 people from the city of North Bend to give and share the things people needed in the midst of the pandemic.

The key is simply paying attention and listening to the local context and then asking, "What do we already have in our system?" In this case, it was a way of asking the questions: *What do we have? And what do we need?* This was already part of their narrative. It was already part of their way of being. And when a crisis developed, they said, "We can extend this." By simply opening up a conversation that had been private, they activated thousands of people from the community beyond their church. And many, many people were helped and served along the way.

Ann Michel: I'm glad you mentioned the pandemic. You were in the midst of writing this book as the COVID crisis developed. Some scientists and medical professionals may have predicted that a global pandemic was coming, but very few church people could have anticipated the pandemic. So how could a church have anticipated the major changes in the last 18 months as a result of the pandemic?

Dwight Friesen: It's never really about anticipating the particularity. No one was anticipating a COVID-19 pandemic. But the orientation of anticipating work is to build within the community an imagination that has us thinking forward, so that our immediate reaction when a crisis hits is not simply retreating, pulling back, and protecting our own. Rather, it fosters an imagination that says, "This is our opportunity to discover a way of love. This is an opportunity to follow Jesus into a new way of being." It's not to become something else, all of a sudden, but instead to draw on who we are, like that little corkboard in the youth room. Rather than retreating from whatever the crisis may be, the question is: How do we tap into the formational life of the community and use it to lean into the curve?

Ann Michel: Churches may not have anticipated COVID-19, but forward-thinking churches could have anticipated a future in which electronic giving, digital ministry, and new ways of building community would all be increasingly important. So, some of the trends that have intensified in response to the pandemic could have been anticipated, if not the pandemic itself.

Dwight Friesen: That's exactly right. Throughout the book, we use three primary "dance steps." Step one is *anticipating*. Step two is *reflecting*. Step three is *innovating*. Although the language is our own, the construct really reflects the ancient Christian practice of Benedictine lectio divina. Anticipating is about opening up and listening deeply. What is being said? What are we seeing? What are we hearing? What is the Spirit of God inviting us to see with fresh eyes? What is shimmering in our hearts? It's paying attention to what's already there. Then we reflect not only on the data we've gathered, but even more importantly on what we understand to be the shalomic imagination of God. What is God's dream for us? For humanity? For the globe? And how does that dare us to think of something new and beautiful for ourselves, for our neighbors, and for our globe? Not out of fear, but out of love and hope. And then, once we begin to reflect on what might be possible, the question is, how do we innovate and do something? Not the church writ large, but me, my family, and my faith community. How can we do something, even something small, that imagines that "shalomic possibility," something that believes that God can take what man meant for evil and use it for good. It's that kind of a pivot. It's a resurrection mindset.

Ann Michel: Your book suggests that if the church is going to survive in an increasingly post-Christian world, it's going to be in a radically different form. And you present a lot of examples of individuals, couples, families, and small communities adopting a "whole life approach" to faith. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Dwight Friesen: I don't know how it happened, but sometimes it feels as if following Jesus has been reduced to an add-on to an otherwise well-lived life. As long as I go to church, pray a few prayers, sing a few songs, give a little bit here or there, that's somehow adequate. I know that sounds really judgmental. But Tom and I believe that following the way of Jesus is the best way to live. When we see Jesus, we're seeing the mystery of fully God and fully human. We see in Jesus a person who lives for the sake of others and for the sake of community in a way that is self-emptying to the flourishing of all. That's not simply an add-on to my life. That is a whole way of being. That is a deeply holistic imagination for following in the way of Jesus.

Ann Michel: So, it's the difference between *going* to church and *being* church? You highlight in your book a lot of examples of creative new ways of being church, perhaps like the Fresh Expressions movement. Is that the direction that you see Christianity in North America going?

Dwight Friesen: I would go even beyond Fresh Expressions. More than *being* church, I think there's a kind of *discovering* church. I think we're at the tail end of the Christendom paradigm of church which involved a collusion of church with state that resulted in denominations that are almost little franchises, with each one trying to carve out their own piece of the pie with a distinctive flavor. Of course, I'm part of a denomination. You're part of a denomination. Most of us are. That's not a bad thing. But I think when God looks at any one of our neighborhoods or cities, God sees the church as those people who are seeking to follow in the way of Jesus. If that's the case, what would it look like to actually discover a new way of being church that's less about keeping our market share or our piece of the pie, and more about living in the day to day? When we're listening deeply to our place trying to discover a new way of being church, all of a sudden we're asking ourselves how do

we actually learn to fit together as the church in our place, as an actual body of Christ where we need each other? Throughout the pandemic, one of the things that has been most encouraging to me is seeing followers of Christ actually join together across denominations for the sake of supporting each other and their neighborhoods.

Ann Michel: If what you describe is the green growing edge of the Christian faith, do you see a future role for traditional congregations and denominations or other faith institutions?

Dwight Friesen: I think there is a role for them. Historically, the church has been very adaptable and that's going to be the key. The denominations and the traditional churches that carry on will be those who lead in adaptability. I'm not opposed to church structure. I'm not in any way an anti-institutionalist. To me, institution and the kind of spirit of church that I'm talking about have to go together. It's almost like body and soul. If the body is the corporeal part of my being, and the soul is that which animates it, to be a human being is to be both structure and spirit. Church institutions and structures will need to change, but the church will still require systems and structures.

Ann Michel: I understand that you were once a church planter. Your book suggests a different way of thinking about church planting. Maybe that isn't even a helpful term anymore, but how do you see it unfolding in the future?

Dwight Friesen: Church planting is a contested term. Both of those words have problems in some respects. I don't know how to get away from the word *church*. I actually love the word because I love the church. It's been my calling to serve Christ by serving Christ's church. But I don't like the word *planting* anymore. The term holds the notion that the planter knows what kind of church needs to be in a particular place, and if I go there like Johnny Appleseed and plant that seed, we know what will emerge.

None of this language is perfect yet, but I like the language of *church discovering* — discovering the church that wants to be birthed in a given place. Because I believe that God is at work in a place prior to the church planter showing up. God is always present, always at work. And so, it's less about the planter executing their vision and more about listening and surrendering their own vision and joining what God's already doing, even uniting the warring factions within that given place, discovering the redemption narrative that's particular to that place. It is a matter of deep listening and surrender.

Ann Michel: Based on the model in your book, what is a good first step for a leader in a typical church to live into some of these changes you're describing.

Dwight Friesen: This might sound way too simple but start walking your neighborhood regularly at different times of the day. Walk it alone. Walk with other people. Don't just walk your dog and wait for your dog to do its business. But walk with the anticipation that the Spirit of God will speak to you throughout your neighborhood, the place where you are, the context of your faith community. That's one of the primary ways God teaches us to discover presence. Listen and assume and anticipate that the Spirit of God is going to speak through your community. Discover the narratives. Who are the heroes? Who are the villains? Whose voices are not heard? Who gets marginalized? Are there systemic oppressions you haven't

been aware of before? Or maybe oppressions that are present to you all the time? And let those break your heart. Let them open your imagination. We listen to our place as embodied creatures in this time. Body, place, and time are the primary guides God uses to help us discover presence and discover God's way. That's the starting place. And then, with all of the things you see, dare to ask: What could be different? What could express the Kingdom of God? What resonates with your community's history? What would break your community's heart? And, finally, what could we do about this? We can't do it all. But we're here and this is happening and we can do something.

Ann Michel: You made that sound so simple. But we have so many ways of detaching ourselves from the reality that surrounds us, that the simple act of opening our eyes and allowing ourselves to see our neighbors through God's eyes is really a radical thing. So, thank you!

About Author



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Dwight J. Friesen is a professor at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. He also serves with Parish Collective, an organization that helps leaders and their groups recover their neighborhoods and participate in whole-life discipleship in the Jesus-Way. His most recent book is *2020s Foresight: Three Vital Practices for Thriving in a Decade of Accelerating Change* (Fortress Press, 2020), available at [Fortress Press](#).



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