

# Futures: The family business

## An Autobiographical Essay

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Foresight 2003 – September 2003

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From September 25-27, 2003, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Dr. Dale on campus at Regent University, for the first annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Dr. Dale was circulated to participants beforehand. We encourage you to join us next year for our annual Foresight conference, as we hear from top futurists from the both the U.S. and around the world.

### **Dr. Bob Dale**

serves as assistant executive director for the Virginia Baptist Mission Board and director, Center for Creative Church Leadership Development. He is the author of 200 articles, columns and scripts, and has penned 20 books, such as *Leadership for a Changing Church* and *Leading Edge: Leadership Strategies from the New Testament*.



MY SON, A PROFESSIONAL DEGREED FUTURIST, was asked in a broadcast interview a few years ago why he had chosen to become a futurist. His answer surprised me: "It's the family business." After more consideration, I see he was right. Futuring is in our blood and has been for a long time.

### **My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys...and Frontiersmen**

With apologies to Willie Nelson for adding the frontiersmen reference to his cowboy song, the frontier has always been an important element in my personal and professional journey. I've long been drawn to stories of people who risked new ventures, set the pace of progress, and learned as they went along. As a kid growing up in the Ozark Mountains of southwestern Missouri, I read every book I could find in our school and county libraries on the adventurers who opened the American frontier. Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Buffalo Bill Cody, Kit Carson, John Colter, Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, Wild Bill Hickok were my favorites. These leaders have been variously described as trailblazers, pioneers, map makers, scouts, explorers, and discoverers. Occasionally, some of them were also called gamblers, and a few of them were referred to as missionaries.

Later, as an adult, I discovered that my grandfathers, the one from Missouri and the one from Virginia, had been working cowboys together on the same ranch in the Oklahoma Territory. My Virginia grandfather then moved farther westward, taking advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862 to conquer, cultivate, and claim a

square mile of prairie near Hugoton, Kansas. He and his contemporaries turned that sea of grass into an ocean of wheat and created the breadbasket of the growing nation. In retrospect, the frontier should have been an interest of mine; it was in my blood even before I knew and understood my lineage.

When I was ten, my parents bought our family farm for the second time. At the beginning of World War II, the federal government had taken a huge block of properties, including our farm, and converted it into Camp Crowder, an army training base. (Here's your useless fact for the day. If you watched the classic Dick Van Dyke show on television, you may remember that the characters of Rob and Laura Petrie met during a USO show at Camp Crowder in Missouri, according to the show's plotline.) It was a grand adventure for me to help carve a farm from near-wilderness. A decade of neglect, widespread hand grenade practice, and the natural growth of underbrush had turned our farm into a rugged frontier. We had to clear fields and fencerows, rebuild barns and buildings, all the while fighting weather to make a river bottom farm productive again. It was hard, sweaty, persistent work to raise corn and cows in what had been untended and untamed territory. There was, ironically, an element of romance in the struggle as well. Why not? My heroes were frontiersmen, and I wanted to be just like them.

On Sundays my family joined other families at the Sweetwater Baptist Church, a community taking its place name from the flood that washed the beehives away. There I learned to love the great sweeping stories of the Bible. The narratives of the patriarchs in Genesis, the spread of the Church in the prairie fire of evangelism and missions in Acts, and the boldness of Jesus in the Gospels shaped me. These sagas had (and still have) the same taste as the frontier for me. These stories appealed to me through their themes of action, hope, and the widening the scope of faith in the practical world.

For me, the future always leads into territory we haven't inhabited before, into acts of faith we haven't lived out before, and into risks we haven't faced before. Futures call us to wide-open spaces without maps and to frontiers that invite us to claim them and transform them into productive places. The frontiers of the future can become the threads that weave together multiple generations of families like mine. From our frontier roots, my father and wife both labored in insurance, my son in futures, and my daughter in architecture/design. Futuring is about frontiers and is in our blood.

### **A Thirst for First**

Frontiers are settings where it's generally important to be first, and "first" has been a motivating factor in my life. Consequently, I, a firstborn, was first in my class, first in my extended family to earn a doctorate and to be published, the first minister in my family, the first to marry a PK (preacher's kid), and the initiator of fresh ministries in every setting in which I served. I ministered in five local churches in Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas. Each of these churches launched successful new ministries during my work with them. For instance, the Clear Creek Church increased the number of men in its membership fourfold and built its first and only addition to its worship space. The Birchman Avenue Church experienced a flurry of young people who committed themselves to vocational ministry and began a mentoring ministry. I served as the first permanent pastor for the new mission church at Joy Chapel and guided them through their first marked growth spurt. The upscale Royal Lane Church wrestled with biblical principles and cultural relevance in creative ways. The First Church expanded its ministry to university students and launched a new marriage enrichment emphasis.

None of these churches was remotely like any of the others. Taking settings alone as an issue, I served churches in open country, blue-collar suburbs, the "velvet ghetto" of upscale suburbia, and a university town. I'm wired to look for patterns and links, but there didn't seem to be similarities to me. The only pattern was diversity. I asked God why I couldn't serve similar types of churches, and He ignored me for a while. He had a plan for my future that I wasn't ready for yet.

Maybe I'm just easily bored, but new things call to me. It's reported that Daniel Boone knew it was time to plunge deeper into the frontier when he could hear the barks from his nearest neighbors' dogs. These intrusive noises left him feeling instinctively crowded, and he yearned for more wide-open spaces. There have been times when I too knew it was time to move on. 1973 was one of those times.

Tip O'Neill noted that all politics are local. The same had been true for me in ministry. I had seen local congregations as the frontline of the kingdom of God and was blessed to serve in changing and challenging local arenas. To my surprise a new horizon called to me, and in 1973 I switched from retail ministry to wholesale ministry. While I still believe the local church is where the primary action of ministry is, I've spent thirty years now in seminaries and mission boards preparing others for the opportunities of ministry frontiers. And, even in those varied settings the "first" pattern persisted.

At the Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville, I joined an exciting work team of trainers and consultants, specializing in pastoral leadership and pastoral care. We were a new team doing new work across the entire nation, and it was great fun. I felt like a barnstormer, an innovator. An image flashed through my thoughts periodically: I imagined myself in a team of brave aviators flying open cockpit biplanes with colorful neck scarves flowing in the breeze. As I traveled, observed, and interacted, I saw many cultures and churches that stretched and enriched my restricted Ozark faith-style and my vision of the kingdom of God.

In Nashville I began to be published widely for the first time, a heady experience since I was barely past thirty and had only recently found my own professional voice. In that denominational setting, I was mentored wisely and well. I saw God's work through a wide-angle lens for the first time. I realized I'd thought, believed, and ministered in a world I'd made much too small. Ironically, at the same time my faith perspective exploded, my personal world collapsed. I became a full-blown diabetic, and travel became almost impossible for me. A new classroom in a new setting every week became too much.

God moved me into a ministry where my classroom stayed in the same place week after week. I became the first professor of pastoral leadership and church ministry at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina in the summer of 1977 and director of the seminary's doctoral program. I don't know if it was a divine sign or not, but I left Nashville on the day Elvis Presley died. I drove through that night listening to every hymn Elvis ever recorded, a good transition perhaps for a person who would teach practical and applied theology to mostly southerners for more than a decade. In Wake Forest the diversity of my local church ministry experience paid huge dividends in my classrooms, since I was preparing ministers for every kind of church and for many types of settings. Southeastern was a fertile and free setting to dig into the specialty of pastoral leadership, write a book or two each year, and consult with a variety of local, national, and international ministries. It was in the village called the Forest of Wake where my children were educated and planted their faith roots.

Unfortunately, the Baptist family in the South became increasingly divided as the decade of the 1980s unfolded. It seemed the new seminary board members brought even smaller, narrower mindsets than I'd earlier brought out of the Ozark Mountains. One new trustee was mystified to discover more subjects than Old and New Testament were taught in seminaries. He admitted to an anti-education viewpoint and became even more skeptical when he discovered missions, theology, church history, and practical churchmanship cluttered seminarian's studies. Educating students is a fulltime calling for seminary professors. So, when trustees, an institution's policy makers, need to be educated as well, the joy of teaching wanes quickly. I learned some futures didn't fit my faith and determined to minister where I was appreciated and challenged.

On January 1, 1989 I joined the staff of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board and returned to the geographic roots of my homesteader grandfather. My job was to lead a team of folks who were the ministers to ministers. We experimented with some pilot programs in leadership development for young leaders, stymied leaders, and change leaders. In 1994, the Mission Board officially established the Center for Creative Church Leadership Development with me as founding director. Our specialty has been growing congregation-wide leaders who use organic approaches to leadership. We've assumed that since churches are living entities in Scripture and in practice, they deserve leaders who don't try to turn them into well-oiled machines. Organic leaders are, in Leonard Sweet's description, "ancient-future," matching both their Biblical roots and their post-modern ministry opportunities.

I try to practice future-oriented, organic leadership as well as teach it. I serve the Mission Board as Assistant Executive Director. Additionally, I linked up nearly ten years ago with Dave Odom at the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem to launch the Leadership Summit, a network of church-related leadership developers who live and work from Baltimore to Biloxi and from Jacksonville to Louisville. We gather twice annually to learn from an expert as well as to swap ideas that are working for us and working in us.

Another key leadership opportunity for me has been service on the Board of Directors of the Virginia Institutes of Pastoral Care (VIPCare). As president, I guided the Board to preserve the future of this statewide pastoral counseling and education service by crafting a strategic plan. Since 9-11, we have returned to our planning document to keep us focused on basic services and to manage tight budgets.

Futures are about firsts. While leaders value what's old—the foundations of history and tradition, it's the new that motivates us. We want to blaze trails, set the pace, frame conversations, create options, and join God in making all things new.

### **You Were Always on My Mind...Hope and Horizons**

Although my favorite theologian Willie Nelson didn't tell it, there's a story that serves as a rudder for me on what leaders do. Methodist Bishop William Quayle was traveling by train across South Carolina once. The dining car he was on was filled with salesmen. Quayle's charisma and gift of gab quickly impressed his traveling companions. Assuming he was also a salesman, one of the men asked, "Hey, buddy. What's your line? What do you sell?" The bishop's answer was immediate and instructive. "I sell horizons," Quayle replied.

Selling horizons is exactly what leaders do. We energize people around possibilities. We raise expectations and point toward better prospects. Napoleon referred to leaders as merchants of hope. Horizons, hope, and futures are all targets of leaders. Leadership is mostly about tomorrows.

My Bible brims with hope. In general terms, the Bible reflects three views of the future. (1) The Hebrew prophetic view presents open-ended challenges coupled with the faithful's responses. This perspective points to an array of futures with God and His followers in covenant to create a better world. (2) The Persian apocalyptic opinion of the future describes an imminent, fixed, and cataclysmic end of history. This millennial worldview was illustrated in the win-lose actions of the Branch Davidians. (3) The Greek teleological view emphasizes history is moving on a predetermined track. Believers are called to get in step with the plan.

Personally, the prophetic view of the future in the Bible has always offered the most meaning for me. I'm stretched by partnership with God in impacting groups and the world. I was exposed to the millennial perspective at the Clear Creek Church of my childhood and youth, but that view left me unsatisfied. The unclear imagery and the changing names of the anti-Christ were confusing. Likewise, my commitment to the biblical concept of free will made the teleological opinion unappealing to me as well.

In the end, I'm committed to the Bible's unyieldingly hopeful vista. And, I'll more than willing to leave the details of hope in God's hands. After all, when Jesus spoke of the signs of the end, He said: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24: 36, NIV). If Jesus doesn't know the specifics of the future, I'm not going to fret about them either. I'll just believe God's future is best and behave accordingly.

By professional training, I'm a multidisciplinary behavioral scientist and a believer in hope. My seminary doctorate is in ethics, a blend of theology and sociology. During my time in seminary in the 1960s, heady change was in the air. New horizons and fresh hope were everywhere. Since I had majored in psychology in college and later spent a sabbatical studying clinical psychology, that background has made me a lifelong "people detective." But, Christian ethics widened the angle of my curiosity to focus on congregations, groups, teams, and systems and to look for hope in those clusters. Membership in Consultant Trainers Southwest opened new approaches to group understandings for me as well.

To trace the theme of hope in congregational systems, let me overview some of my leadership books. Maybe this process will offer an insider's view of my writing. (I was taught that, in reviewing and critiquing books, authors were given their own perspective. They had made a choice and had written about it. Therefore, what was under review was how well writers dealt with their selected topics.) Let me take you inside a half dozen of my books and show you briefly what I intended to say on the theme of hope in leadership.

*To Dream Again: How to Help Your Church Come Alive* (Broadman, 1981) was published in the midst of the church growth movement. I was troubled that many of the church growth gurus were offering mostly an array of

tricks and shortcuts. I was concerned that, without a strong theological foundation, growing churches might end up unhealthy and without anchors. So, I wrote *To Dream Again* to emphasize church health and to anchor health in the kingdom of God. This hope-filled book sold well for nearly twenty years. A Broadman editor told me it was that publisher's most important book for the decade of the 1980s. I stopped counting the number of doctor of ministry projects based on the bell-shaped curve model from the book when they exceeded two hundred. As a follow-up, I wrote a companion book, *Keeping the Dream Alive: Understanding and Building Congregational Morale* (Broadman, 1988), to balance an exclusive emphasis on mission in the first book. Thinking of leadership as a two-sided coin with mission on one side and morale on the other, I offered an organic model of morale based on a congregational weather map.

I spent a sabbatical during 1983 at the number one leadership development center in the world, the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina. They have the best leadership resource library anywhere and offered a stimulating setting to interact with world-class trainers for leaders. That year I wrote *Ministers as Leaders* (Broadman, 1984) to show how leaders, especially those with a catalytic style, influenced their systems. In chemistry, catalysts speed reactions, clean up reactions, and aren't used up in the process. That's a powerful image of leadership. It's no accident that catalysts offer an organic image of leadership as well.

1986 was a very good year for me in writing, providing an opportunity to dig into theologies for leaders and to stretch the horizons of pastoral leadership. *Sharing Ministry with Volunteer Leaders* (Convention, 1986) looked at congregational leadership inside out. Using New Testament images of the church as a living entity, I described the work of lay and clergy leaders in organic terms, such as planting, nurturing, partnering, and making healthy. A textbook, *Pastoral Leadership: A Handbook of Resources for Effective Congregational Leadership* (Abingdon, 1986), overviewed the "how's" of setting the pace in local churches. In eighteen chapters, the book looks at leadership theologically and practically, provides a problem-solving laboratory, and explores the personal dimensions of leadership. Chapters on planning and transitioning are particularly future-targeted.

*Leading Edge: Leadership Strategies from the New Testament* (Abingdon, 1996) grew out of Virginia Baptist's Young Leaders' Program. I'd tried to help these high-potential younger ministers realize that few, if any, churches have the resources to do all they'd like to attempt for God. Strategy, the "which" and "when" of leadership, crystallized for me when I wised up to one simple truth: the Book had already done the work for believers on this issue. Jesus demonstrates leader focus, Acts shows flexibility, the Pastoral Epistles calls us to a future-orientation, and Revelation describes ways to live with faith when life falls in. Focusing with flexibility on the future is the New Testament's basic strategic cycle. *To Dream Again* is probably my best-known book, but *Leading Edge* is my favorite and, for my tastes, my best to date.

*Leadership for a Changing Church: Charting the Shape of the River* (Abingdon, 1998) attempted to look at pastoral leadership in a post-modern world, presented leadership as processes, and moved more specifically into organic approaches for leaders. In many ways, this is a transitional book as I left scientific models and metaphors for leaders behind and began to practice organic ones instead. You'll notice the leveraged, hydraulic, pressurized models of the machine age have been replaced by living, growing, natural images of systems and leadership. This "ancient-future" approach moves back to the Bible and forward into a beyond-modern future.

Writing has a way of freeze-framing thoughts, recording ideas at a specific point in time. I've noticed a pattern in my reference point for writing. I've mostly written books to sum up ideas that have been simmering for a while and are ready to be "harvested." Many of my articles, none of which is noted here, often stake out and "cultivate" ideas for further growth. In both cases, it's interesting for me to see how pivotal future themes have been for me.

### **Back (and Forward) to Business**

Personally and professionally, my motivating drivers have been frontiers, firsts, and horizons—all future images. These themes have been, are, and will remain "the family business." Frontiers, firsts, and horizons anchor what I value and how I try to live. Hopefully, there are lots of futures ahead for me still.