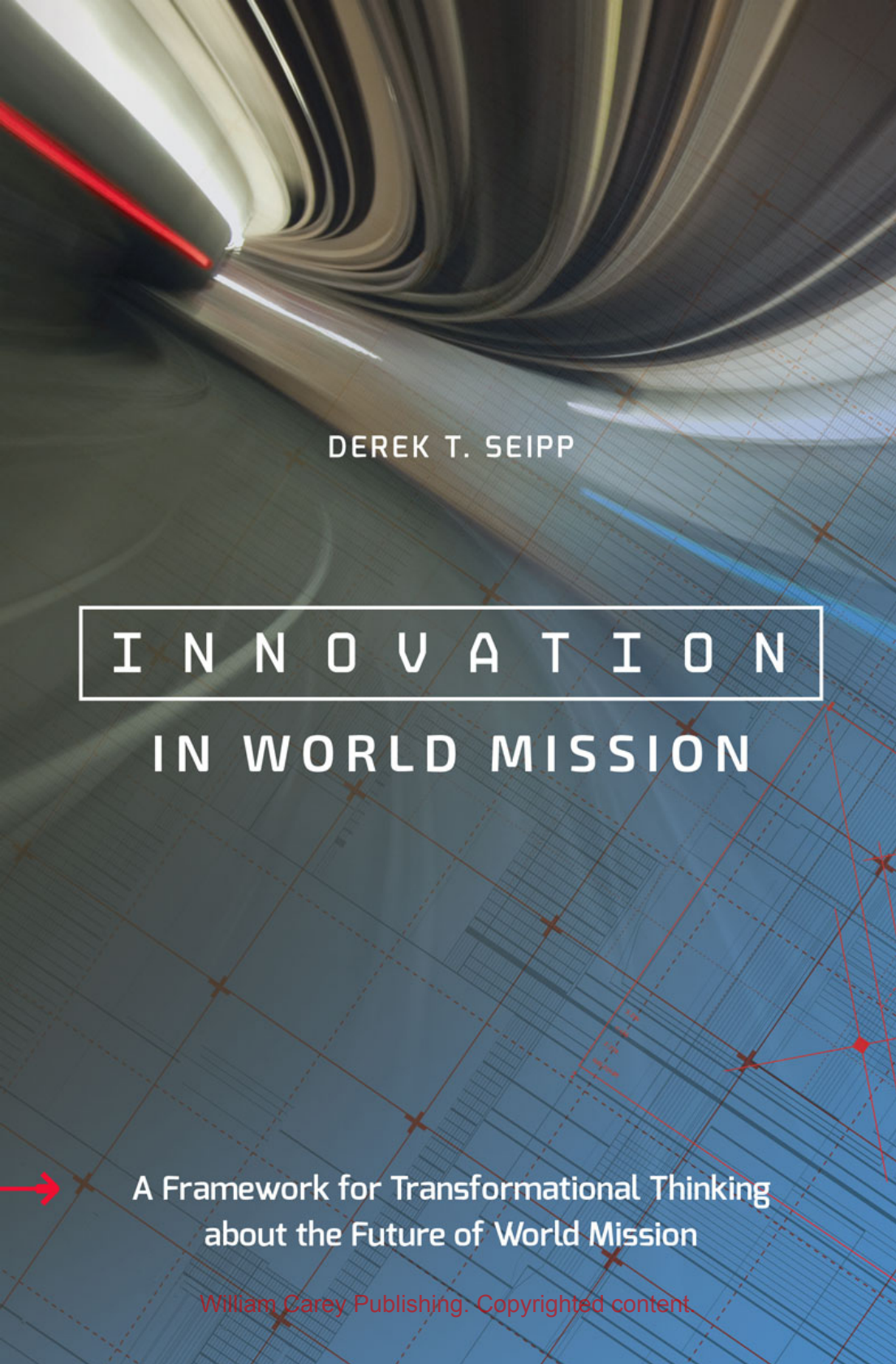


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Innovation in World Mission: A Framework for Transformational Thinking about the Future of World Mission

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CHAPTER 1

INNOVATION AND OUR CHANGING WORLD

"A wonderful future awaits . . ." Psalm 37:37 (NLT)

The world is changing. We can see it. We can feel it. Technology is impacting everything we do. The world is becoming increasingly secular. Traditional values seem to be fading. The list goes on and on. The world we were familiar with seems to have vanished. A new world is emerging before our eyes. Even though we deal with a timeless gospel, everything around us is changing. And most of the Christians I know do not welcome these changes.

In 2001, I quit my consulting job in Pittsburgh, PA, entered missionary training school, and moved off to China with my wife to train church planters. During the next twelve years we saw incredible changes in China. In the early days, the Internet, broadband, cell phones, they were all new novelties used by a few privileged individuals. Many of our missionary friends were still struggling to get used to e-mail. It was in China that my wife bought her first cell phone.

In the early days, we could ride bicycles two city blocks and be in the countryside. There, at the edge of the city, it was as if the modern world suddenly stopped and then we jumped fifty or a hundred years back in time. On one side of the street flashy stores carried expensive designer handbags, on the other side of the street, people still carried water buckets suspended from a bamboo poles stretched across their shoulders. When we left that city seven years later, we had to drive twenty minutes just to find any trace of the countryside. When we first moved there, the churches were newborns, struggling for their very survival. Today, these churches are vibrant, mature and growing. Several have ministry expansion plans rivaling those of American churches. The future was unfolding right before our eyes.

When we finally moved back to the states, we thought we were ready for a bit of reverse culture shock, but we were hardly ready for what we found. In only

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twelve years, American values had changed dramatically. The culture, TV, radio, health care, ideals, social issues, etc.; everything noticeably changed in those twelve years. We could only find shadows of things we remembered; the America we thought we knew, was largely unrecognizable.

We initially blamed it on being away for so long. Yet, we found we were not alone in our feelings. Our friends (who had never left the country) felt their world was largely unrecognizable to them as well. It wasn't just us. We all felt like we were playing catch-up to a strange new world emerging before our eyes. It's also not just America. These same changes are happening on a global scale; impacting every aspect of society, business, government, as well as religious beliefs and practices. The ripple effects are sending tsunamis of change to even the remotest of villages. And if we are to believe the researchers, these changes are only accelerating.

STRATEGIC DRIFT

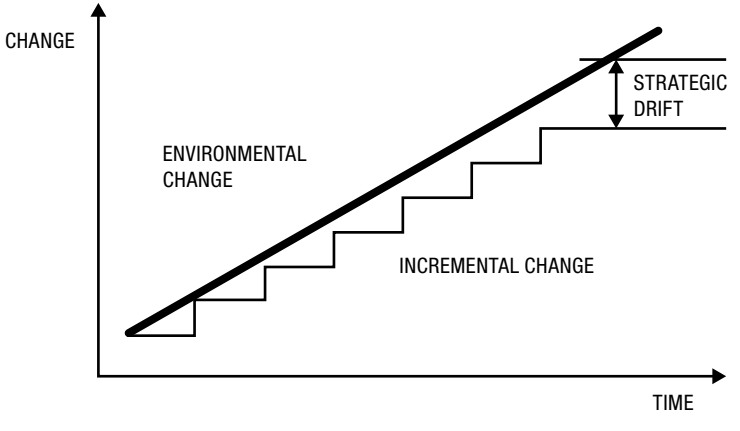
Our brains are wired to identify familiar patterns. This helps us recognize faces, learn languages, and remember where we placed our car keys. But this also has a detrimental effect for recognizing change as it gives us a tendency to ignore cues that something else is different (Hannagan 2009). Instead, our brains naturally pay attention to the cues that confirm what has remained the same. We have to see changes multiple times before we fully register that a full-blown change has occurred. As a result, change happens faster than we realize. In the meantime, we're fooled into thinking we're safe and don't need to adjust.

Further complicating matters, the projects we manage, the programs we put into effect, and the organizations we lead all have a certain degree of inertia. People are invested financially and mentally to our current plans. Assuming we've fully recognized that change is happening, we have to convince others regarding the impact, and how we should react. Such discussions are often held off until quarterly or annual reviews, yet at those times, so many issues need to be discussed that the issue simply falls off the table. Even if it is, choosing a new strategy and implementing in takes time. Consequently, we react even slower still. You could say our organizations are designed to stay the same.

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With our own inherent biases against recognizing the full extent of change, the corrective steps we take usually fall short of what's actually needed (Hannagan 2009). This results in small, but growing gaps between what we actually do and what needs to be done. To make matters worse, these corrections are merely just reactive, rather than proactive in nature. This means we're constantly trailing behind with the changes gaining an increasing lead. It becomes increasingly difficult to adjust activities based on conditions that were true three, five, ten, or even twenty or more years ago. Plans can only be adjusted so much until something entirely different is needed. Still, we constantly try to adapt what we already do to meet new conditions. Hannagan calls this widening gap, strategic drift.

When the Internet first appeared, it was mostly text, with very few images. Telephone companies found they could use analog modems, previously used for text based electronic bulletin boards (remember that loud scratchy sound they made?) to connect users to this new digital world. Speed was slow because the telephone companies used existing capabilities (old twisted copper telephone wires) to respond to new changes in the environment. But, when most of the Internet was just text, fast speeds weren't necessary. Over time, web pages became interactive with rich multimedia, and those copper wires simply couldn't keep up. New, faster modems emerged, but they fell further and further behind the increasing changes. Then came video and YouTube. With diminishing returns, those old capabilities couldn't be tweaked enough to meet emerging needs.



Hannagan, T., *Management: Concepts & Practices* (5th ed.), 2009, 190.

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Eventually, those screechy dial-up modems weren't good enough to keep up with what people wanted to do online. Cable companies responded with a much faster technology and people started switching. As the telephone companies increasingly lost customers and revenue, they had to respond. After trying a variety of technologies based on those twisted copper wires, they finally responded by putting superfast fiber optic wires directly into people's homes.

But this is not just about technology. When I was young, I remember singing hymns out of the pew hymnbook. But the emerging Christian contemporary music industry was changing the songs people wanted to sing. Many connected better with emerging praise and worship songs, and they wanted to sing these in church. Soon, there were praise books sitting next to the hymnbooks.

As soon as these praise books were printed, new songs continued to emerge. While the hymnbooks didn't change in decades, within a few years a second praise book appeared next to the hymnal. These songbooks couldn't keep up with the speed at which the new songs were emerging, and buying new songbooks every year was getting expensive for churches. A gap was emerging. Churches started using overhead projectors to shine these songs up on large screens. But this also created a new problem for the music industry that suddenly wasn't selling any new praise books or hymnals. Today, churches don't buy songbooks; they license the right to project the praise song lyrics from the publishers, through a company called CCLI.

Strategic drift eventually increases to the point that the gaps become vast chasms. When that happens, publishing another songbook just doesn't handle the need anymore. An incrementally faster dial-up modem doesn't handle the exponential increase in demand for bandwidth. Existing activities simply fail to meet the changing needs of the environment. As this happens, a wide door of opportunity is open for someone else to suddenly step in and gobble up existing markets, products, and services (Burke 2011). Because the process of drifting away is so gradual, most organizations don't realize the resulting chasm until it's too late. It's the classic boiling frog syndrome: a frog is placed into lukewarm water and the temperature is gradually increased. The frog never recognizes the temperature change and eventually he's cooked alive. We fail to recognize the changes happening around us, and then one day we wake up to find ourselves in a hot pot of boiling water.

Every idea, every product, every plan is vulnerable to strategic drift. Motorola dominated the analog cell phone market in the 90's. When digital cell phone technology emerged, Motorola dismissed it as a fad. Motorola drifted. A

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chasm formed. Nokia saw the open door and walked through. Within a few years, Nokia cornered the market, and the mighty Motorola was suddenly struggling for survival. Yet, Nokia eventually fell to the same problem. People simply wanted more from their phones. Apple recognized the world had drifted. The iPhone, took over the market. Today, there are signs Apple is struggling with gaps being exploited by ultra-low-cost Android phones. The cycle continues.

World mission is no less immune to these changes. Local churches are engaging overseas, bypassing mission agencies. Churches (knowingly or unknowingly) recognized a gap created by increasing ease of communication and travel. They simply stepped in, and there was nothing malicious about it. The world changed. Many agencies, being heavily invested in their own paradigms, failed to recognize the drift. A chasm formed. A door of opportunity opened and churches walked right through. Most every mission leader I know admits to feeling that new pressures are emerging. People's giving patterns are changing. Young missionaries have different motivations than the previous generation. The mission field itself has changed. Our world is getting smaller. Strategic drift is separating us from being as effective as we could be. How do we fill the chasm? How do we choose the right actions amid such uncertainty? How do we know we'll be relevant in the years ahead? How do we know our actions won't waste kingdom resources?

INNOVATION

Innovation is the process that fills the gap. According to Merriam-Webster, the word innovate means to, "do something in a new way" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2014). Because something so radically different is needed to fill the chasm left by strategic drift, the new products seem revolutionary. They often redefine the way an entire sector or industry acts and works. Know this: innovation is not just a fad. In fact the idea isn't new at all.

There are words from antiquity that have been translated "innovate," but our modern word comes from the Latin, *innovates,* which dates to the mid 1500's. Its modern popularity finds its roots in a 1934 book *The Theory of Economic Development* by Joseph Schumpeter. In it, Schumpeter shows how ideas and knowledge are brought together into new combinations, creating new entrepreneurial opportunities. Later, in 1953, Peter Drucker famously stated that innovation and marketing were the "two-and only two-basic functions" of any organization

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