

Think big: Our dreams are too small

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

"Make no little plans," wrote 19th-century architect Daniel Burnham. "They have no magic to stir humanity's blood and probably themselves will not be realized."

Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency.

Remember that our sons and daughters are going to do things that will stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon, beauty. Think big.

This statement was much more than rhetoric. It embodied Burnham's commitment to the design of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the Flatiron building in New York and Union Station in Washington, D.C. Burnham thought big, and he put his thoughts and dreams into action.

There have been times when Christians have thought big too, and we are their beneficiaries. They founded colleges and universities, hospitals and children's homes, cathedrals and symphonies. Yet in contemporary America, thinking big seems to have become the provenance of Hollywood, of medical research, and of technology entrepreneurship.

Mainline Protestant churches seem trapped in a narrative of decline. Meetings tend to be about financial cutbacks, membership losses and diminished influence. We reassure ourselves that God calls us to faithfulness, not success, which is true. But there is nothing wrong with succeeding big as long as the focus is on faithful embodiment of the gospel. Too often we turn "faithfulness" into a misguided justification for aiming low, settling for mediocrity and remaining content with decline. When "big ideas" are proposed in mainline denominations, they are too often dismissed as quick-fix solutions imposed on unsuspecting communities and institutions.

Rather than dreaming about what God might be calling us to do in ambitious faithfulness, we sneer at shallow self-promoters whose big ideas and ambitions have little to do with Jesus Christ. Sometimes we are right—Joel Osteen, Marianne Williamson and Thomas Moore seem to be more about self-promotion and prosperity than God.

But what about the communities that are led by Rick Warren, Kirbyjon Caldwell, Adam Hamilton and Brian McLaren? These communities bear marks of Christian commitment, and their pastors demonstrate authentic faith and commitment to the gospel. Regardless of whether we disagree with them on this or that theological point or understanding of the church, it would be difficult to say that the success of these communities is fundamentally incompatible with faithfulness to the gospel.

Or what about Millard Fuller and Habitat for Humanity? There was a case where thinking big and being able to dream led to a powerful, international reality. Where are the successors to Dame Cicily Saunders, who started the modern hospice movement as a sign of her conviction that Christians should be able to provide better care for dying people and their families?

These questions came to mind as I listened to a successful business leader recently. This man had thought about going into the ordained ministry, then decided to go into business and finally concluded that he was involved in both: his leadership in business was an expression of discipleship to Jesus Christ. His company has been marked by significant growth and financial success, even though its primary mission is to place stores in underresourced areas—rural communities, urban poor communities—that other companies typically flee. As he noted, churches tend to flee those areas too.

Two of his comments took me back to Daniel Burnham and to our calling as Christians. First, the businessman said that “leadership requires that we define what is big enough to challenge the organization.” He added that “if you feel overwhelmed by the task before you, then you are blessed because it will compel you to lean more on God.”

Could it be that we lack sufficient trust in God and passion for the gospel? Did our forebears who dreamed big and created enduring institutions—do our contemporaries who have accomplished large-scale change—cultivate a trust and passion that we lack?

Not all big dreams involve scale and scope, as God repeatedly displays in scripture. A big commitment can be found in something simple and plain. The issue is what we dare hope God might be able to accomplish in the world, in our lives and in our work together. Are our dreams too small?

The letter to the Ephesians contains a verse that challenges us. “Now to [God] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (3:20). The grammar may throw us. As my fifth-grade teacher told me repeatedly, you can’t modify “unique” or “all.” Something either is unique or it isn’t. And you can’t have “more than all.” Yet the theological point is profound. If we stretch the limits of our imagination, and then stretch them some more, we still cannot imagine what God is able to accomplish working within us. God is able to accomplish not just “more” than all we can ask or imagine, not just “far more,” but “abundantly far more.”