



FUTURE COMMISSION 2050

**SCENARIOS OF THE FUTURE OF
THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM**

EXECUTIVE REPORT

Identifying the Signals, Trends and Drivers of Change
Affecting the Future of Inter-Congregational Financial
Cooperation in the Southern Baptist Convention.



Note to reader: *Southern Baptists are entering a time of change. Questions around trust, funding, and generational leadership are rising across our churches and entities. This report fulfills the original commitment made through the Future Commission 2050 Project and its supporting Doctor of Ministry research. It called for a published summary of key findings and strategic scenarios for the future of Cooperative Program giving.*

This brief introduces the core insights, scenario framework, and ministry implications developed through that process. The full report, including expanded narratives, planning tools, and biblical reflection, is available in the book *The Next Era of the Cooperative Program*, available on Amazon and at ForbesStrategies.com in June 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

THE FUTURE COMMISSION 2050 PROJECT

The Cooperative Program has long been the shared funding pathway for Southern Baptist missions. As generational change accelerates, cultural trust declines, and new giving models emerge, its future requires fresh attention.

This summary is based on the Future Commission 2050 Project, a research effort conducted through a doctoral project led by Chris Forbes, a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The doctoral report is available through academic libraries and is titled *Identifying the Drivers of Change Affecting the Future of the Cooperative Program in the Southern Baptist Convention Through 2050*. Twenty-four leaders from SBC entities, state conventions, and partner ministries engaged in a national survey, a series of foresight labs, and a horizon scanning process.

Together, they identified seven key drivers already shaping the ministry landscape and created four scenarios to help leaders prepare for the future. These findings offer practical guidance for renewing cooperation in a time of uncertainty.

WHAT WE DID: A MINISTRY-DRIVEN LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

- Created to help Southern Baptist leaders consider the Cooperative Program long-term. Rather than offering short-term fixes, it brought together trusted leaders to explore how giving might change and what that could mean for future ministry.
- The project combined biblical reflection with a practical approach to studying change.

HOW THE WORK TOOK SHAPE

The research followed five key steps:

1. National Survey

Pastors and ministry leaders across the SBC shared their concerns and insights through an open-ended survey. They pointed to challenges and changes across eight major areas: social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, educational, and spiritual.

2. Foresight Panel Formation

A group of 24 leaders was selected, representing state conventions, SBC entities, seminaries, and communications roles. Many were actively involved in advancing Cooperative Program support; some were next-generation leaders who shared a passion for ministry cooperation.

3. In-Person Labs

Leaders gathered in a series of interactive workshops to explore tools for thinking about the future. These included mapping short-term and long-term changes and identifying ministry patterns that may need to shift.

4. Horizon Scanning

Each leader looked for real-world examples of change across the eight domains between sessions. The findings from the 550 signals of change were analyzed to identify the patterns and pressures shaping the ministry.

5. Scenario Development

Using these insights, participants developed four future storylines for the Cooperative Program, ranging from breakdown to renewal. They also described a hopeful outcome, a Preferred Future that reflects a path forward marked by trust, clarity, and shared mission.

KEY APPROACHES BEHIND THE PROJECT

The Future Commission 2050 Project used structured tools to help leaders think clearly about long-term ministry challenges. These methods supported honest reflection, strategic planning, and biblical grounding.

Foresight Thinking

Participants explored a range of future possibilities to better inform decisions in the present. The focus was not prediction but preparation.

Scenario Planning

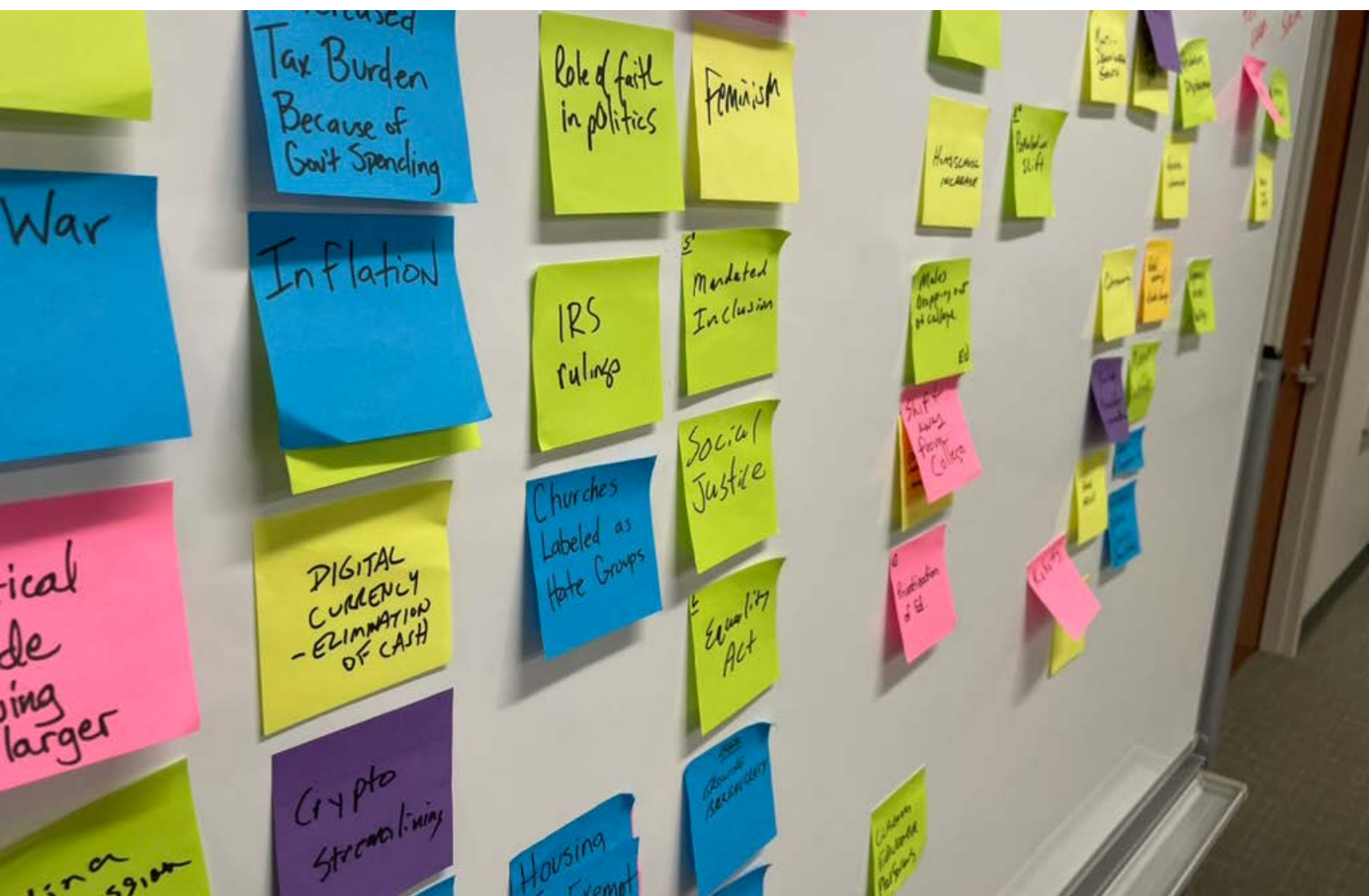
Leaders developed storylines based on how trends might grow or intersect. This helped surface risks and opportunities that may not be obvious in current planning.

Biblical Reflection

Paul's approach to shared giving across churches offered a theological foundation for thinking about cooperation today.

STEEPLES Scanning

The project used eight categories—social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, educational, and spiritual—to identify the broader forces shaping ministry contexts.



WHAT WE FOUND: SEVEN LONG-TERM CHALLENGES ALREADY SHAPING THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

As part of the Future Commission 2050 Project, leaders examined survey responses, real-world signals, and workshop findings to identify major forces already reshaping Cooperative Program participation. Seven long-term challenges stood out. Each reflects a deeper shift in how churches think, give, and relate to the wider SBC family.

These are not passing trends. They are persistent realities requiring thoughtful response from ministry leaders across the convention.

1. Economic Instability:

Churches face growing financial pressure. Inflation, rising ministry costs, and unpredictable donor behavior make budgets harder to manage. Younger givers often prefer designated giving and are less tied to traditional systems. Longstanding patterns of CP support are weakening as churches reevaluate their commitments.

2. Demographic Shift:

Leadership is changing rapidly. As Baby Boomers retire, many Gen X and Millennial pastors lack deep familiarity with the Cooperative Program identity. At the same time, SBC churches are becoming more ethnically diverse, which is not reflected in leadership structures or funding priorities. The result is growing fragmentation and reduced trust between generations and groups.

3. Educational Revolution:

Seminary enrollment is facing transition as young leaders explore new ways to prepare for ministry. High costs and concerns over theological alignment are pushing some from traditional paths. If no changes are made, SBC schools risk losing connection with the pastors they hope to serve.

4. Technological Evolution:

Digital tools are reshaping how churches engage with mission. Donors now expect transparency and feedback in real time. At the same time, spiritual content is increasingly shaped by algorithms and outside voices. This shift challenges the central structure of Cooperative Program communication and engagement.

5. Spiritual Malaise:

Many churches are experiencing doctrinal drift and a loss of shared conviction. Without a strong theological foundation, support for cooperative giving weakens. Some leaders operate from competing visions of what cooperation should look like, leaving less clarity and urgency for the shared mission.

6. Radical Individualism:

Cultural values now emphasize autonomy and personal expression. In the church, this shows up as resistance to centralized leadership and growing interest in designated giving. Some leaders are more focused on their own platforms than on collective action, making unified funding models harder to sustain.

7. Institutional Distrust:

Trust in SBC systems is strained. Pastors have raised concerns about governance, transparency, and handling CP funds. Participation declines when communication is unclear or decisions seem disconnected from local realities. Rebuilding trust will require structural clarity and deeper relational investment, not just better messaging.

These seven drivers became the foundation for building four future scenarios to guide long-range Cooperative Program planning through 2050.

FOUR FUTURES OF THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

In the final stage of the Future Commission 2050 Project, participants used the identified drivers of change to develop four plausible futures for the Cooperative Program through 2050. These scenarios are not predictions. They are conversation tools to help Southern Baptist leaders explore different future paths, depending on our choices today.

Each scenario reflects a unique combination of pressures and responses. Together, they help frame strategic decisions for churches, state conventions, and national entities.

Scenario Title	Summary Description	Reflection Prompt
Decades of Decay (Continuation)	The current structure remains in place with modest adjustments. Giving continues, but at lower levels. State conventions reduce staff and programs. National entities scale back. The system survives, but with minimal engagement from younger leaders and limited innovation.	What risks are we accepting by relying on the current system without major change?
The Unraveling Thread (Collapse)	Trust erosion and financial pressure lead to sharp decline in participation. Some state conventions move away from CP promotion. National ministries face restructuring or closure. Unified giving fragments. SBC identity becomes more local and issue-driven.	What would happen to global missions and theological education if the CP failed?
A New Era of Stewardship (Transformation)	A new generation of leaders re-engages the CP through clarity and innovation. Giving becomes more transparent. Theological alignment is strengthened. Churches recover a shared vision for cooperation. State and national leaders adapt the model for the next generation.	What would it take to lead transformation rather than simply wait for it?
Preferred Future (Reinvention)	The Cooperative Program returns as the SBC's primary missions funding pathway. Digital platforms give churches real-time visibility into mission impact. Giving becomes more interactive and adaptive. Cooperation grows through transparency and shared conviction, even as structures decentralize.	How can we reimagine cooperation in ways that remain faithful but more responsive?

These futures are starting points for local, state, and national dialogue. They show how different choices, leadership styles, and cultural shifts could shape the next chapter of shared ministry funding. The Next Era of the Cooperative Program unpacks each scenario in greater detail, offering narrative storylines, ministry implications, and tools to guide leadership reflection.

THE PREFERRED FUTURE

Among the four scenarios developed through the Future Commission 2050 Project, one stood out as a hopeful and compelling vision. It reflects what could happen if Southern Baptists recover the theological heart and missional urgency of giving together.

A GLIMPSE OF THE PREFERRED FUTURE

In this future, churches have embraced a deeper culture of stewardship. Giving is not just a financial habit, but a form of discipleship. Congregations teach generosity as part of spiritual formation. Ethnic churches fully engage in SBC leadership, shaping Cooperative Program priorities and participating in shared mission with strength and vision.

Church plants have matured into stable, mission-focused congregations. A spirit of renewal flows through Cooperative Program life, driven by theological clarity, pastoral resilience, and a renewed sense of purpose. The CP is no longer viewed as an outdated system, but as a living platform for gospel partnership.

Click the image to watch a video presenting the four scenarios. Use this report and the video to guide conversations about possible futures. The book *The Next Era of the Cooperative Program* is also a valuable resource for adding depth to these discussions among SBC leaders.

KEY SHIFTS SUPPORTING THIS FUTURE

Economic Pressures Reframed:

Churches face financial realities with new perspective. Giving is tied to spiritual growth. Younger donors are taught to connect their generosity with personal calling and global mission.

Generational Transition with Trust:

Older leaders mentor younger pastors, building a leadership culture marked by continuity, not disruption. The transition feels shared and deliberate.

Technology Serving the Mission:

SBC entities use digital tools for real-time communication and storytelling. Churches see the impact of their giving clearly, which strengthens trust and commitment.

Education That Equips:

Seminaries adapt with flexible, theologically grounded distributed networks. These reach more students and equip them to lead with conviction and skill.

Spiritual Formation Restored:

The Cooperative Program is taught as an expression of obedience and unity, not just a line item in the budget. It becomes part of a church's worship and witness.

A PATH ANCHORED IN GOSPEL STEWARDSHIP

This vision is grounded in transparency, trust, and shared theological identity. It shows how the Cooperative Program could thrive in a changing world by staying rooted in mission and shaped by renewal.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

The Future Commission 2050 Project was never meant to sit on a shelf. It was created to help Southern Baptist leaders think ahead, act wisely, and respond to change with biblical clarity. This summary gives a glimpse of what is possible. The full roadmap is available in *The Next Era of the Cooperative Program* and can be explored more deeply through Incite Futures Labs.

To begin putting these ideas into action, consider the following steps:

- **Reflect with Your Team:** Use the four scenarios to start conversations with your staff, elders, or deacons. The book expands on each one with discussion guides and ministry implications. You can also host a strategic planning session based on the FC50 model. Incite Futures Labs offers customized versions of this experience for churches, associations, and seminaries.
- **Revisit the Why Behind Cooperative Giving:** Reintroduce the biblical foundation for cooperation. Teach from passages like Philippians 4 or 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 to show how shared giving connects with gospel mission. Use stories from the FC50 report or book to highlight how Cooperative Program gifts support real-world ministry outcomes.
- **Evaluate** how your church is forming younger members in generosity. Make sure the Cooperative Program is part of that formation process.
- **Rebuild Local and State Trust:** Foster open dialogue about Cooperative Program participation and how giving decisions are made. Transparency strengthens ownership.
- Invite a CP leader from your state convention or an SBC entity to speak with your leadership team. Use the FC50 drivers of change to frame the conversation.

- Equip younger leaders with resources that explain the cooperative program's history and future. The book can be a training tool for your staff or leadership pipeline.
- **Reimagine How You Lead Forward:** Organize an Incite Futures Lab in your ministry context. These interactive sessions help teams explore signals, trends, and future options grounded in biblical mission. Use tools like scenario planning and backcasting to make decisions that point toward a preferred future, not just institutional maintenance.
- **Pray for a renewed vision of cooperation.** This is a moment for clarity, conviction, and shared calling.

To go deeper, read *The Next Era of the Cooperative Program*, available now at ForbesStrategies.com and on Amazon.

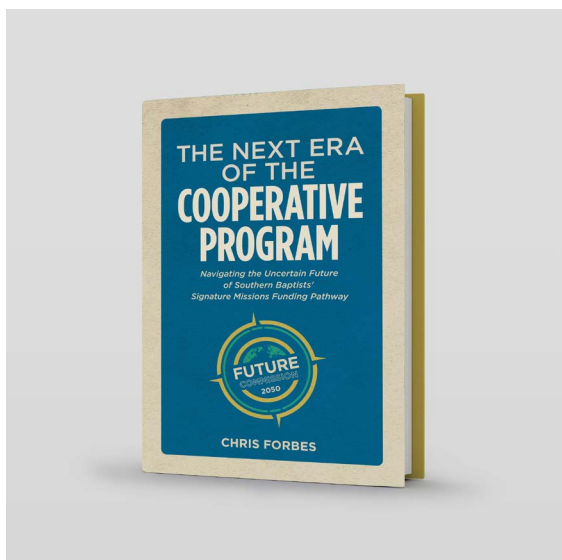
To apply these insights to your ministry setting, visit ForbesStrategies.com/incite to request a hosted lab or schedule a strategy conversation.

The Cooperative Program is not finished. It is entering a new era. The future is not fixed. It is shaped by decisions we make today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Forbes, DMin., is a strategic foresight practitioner and principal strategist at Forbes Nonprofit Strategies. He created the Incite Futures Labs to help ministry leaders apply futures thinking in the ministry context. A graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, his Doctor of Ministry project focused on identifying the key drivers of change affecting the future of Cooperative Program participation in the Southern Baptist Convention. Chris brings more than thirty-five years of ministry and missions leadership to his consulting work, helping denominational leaders navigate complexity and prepare for the future with clarity, biblical conviction, and strategic foresight.

ABOUT THE BOOK



The Next Era of the Cooperative Program Navigating the Uncertain Future of Southern

- Use Four Scenarios
- Navigate Uncertainty
- Strengthen Cooperation
- Shape the Future of the CP

Available on Amazon in June 2025

The book presents the complete findings of the Future Commission 2050 Project, along with four scenario narratives and biblical foresight frameworks. It also demonstrates how ministry leaders, state conventions, and SBC entities can utilize practical foresight tools.

MEDIA INQUIRIES AND INTERVIEW REQUESTS

To schedule an interview, request a review copy, or inquire about speaking opportunities related to the Cooperative Program or strategic foresight in ministry leadership, contact:

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Book Marks CP Centennial by Exploring the Future of Cooperative Giving

Independent foresight project invites Southern Baptists to reimagine cooperation for the next generation

OKLAHOMA CITY, OK | June, 2025 – As Southern Baptists reflect on one hundred years of the Cooperative Program, a new book is joining the conversation with a challenge to look forward, not only backward.

The Next Era of the Cooperative Program by Chris Forbes, DMin., is strategically timed for the CP Centennial year and offers a foresight-informed roadmap for the future of cooperative missions funding. Drawing on the insights of the Future Commission 2050 Project, the book presents seven long-range drivers of change, four plausible scenarios for Cooperative Program engagement through 2050, and a preferred future vision titled The Next Era of the Cooperative Program.

The research behind the book was initially conducted as part of Forbes's Doctor of Ministry project at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. It included a national survey of SBC pastors, three strategic foresight labs with denominational leaders, and weeks of structured horizon scanning.

“Southern Baptists are facing a generational transition. The Cooperative Program was visionary in 1925. In 2025, it must be reimaged to serve a new century of churches, leaders, and global mission priorities.”

The book has received encouraging early feedback from Southern Baptist leaders. Dr. Tony Wolfe, Executive Director of the South Carolina Baptist Convention, described it as “a strategic look into the future of SBC Cooperative Program engagement.” Dr. David S. Dockery, President of Southwestern Seminary, called the book “a timely and thoughtful contribution that offers an engaging and winsome path forward.”

Forbes has also published a free strategic brief for ministry teams, state leaders, and SBC executives to accompany the release. The brief summarizes key insights from the project and encourages reflection and planning for the next chapter of the Cooperative Program strategy.

The book and the brief reflect foresight tools developed through Incite Futures Labs, a futures literacy process created by Forbes Nonprofit Strategies designed to help churches and denominational teams engage in foresight-based strategic planning and leadership development.



INCITE FUTURES LABS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER AND BUILD A PREFERRED
FUTURE FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION



FORBES

NONPROFIT STRATEGIES

THE NEXT 10 YEARS WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING. IS YOUR MINISTRY READY?

Faith-based organizations face one of the most disruptive periods in modern history, marked by economic instability, cultural shifts, technological disruption, and institutional decline.

The question is: Will your organization be prepared for what's ahead, or will it struggle to adapt?

Faithful leadership requires more than just reacting to change; it demands wisdom, foresight, and a commitment to stewardship. Thriving ministries discern the times, adapt with biblical conviction, and lead during uncertainty.

At Forbes Strategies, we work with Christian leaders, nonprofits, and ministries to anticipate change, develop effective strategies, and build organizations that can withstand uncertainty.



IS YOUR ORGANIZATION FUTURE-READY?

ASK THESE SIX QUESTIONS:

1. How does our organization address uncertainties and adapt to changes?
2. Do we actively challenge our assumptions and biases in decision-making?
3. Are we scanning the external environment for relevant trends and emerging issues?
4. Do we consider multiple potential futures and plan based on possible scenarios?
5. Is our organization equipped to navigate complexity and ambiguity?
6. What steps can we take to foster a future-ready culture within our faith-based nonprofit?
7. If you see room for growth, you're not alone. The Incite Futures Labs are designed to help.



Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers, they succeed.

PROVERBS 15:22

WHY MINISTRIES NEED STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

We live in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment. Demographic shifts, technological disruption, and economic instability are reshaping how faith-based nonprofits must operate.

Strategic foresight helps ministry leaders:

- Recognize and respond to emerging change,
- Challenge internal assumptions,
- Create adaptive pathways forward,
- And foster biblically grounded, future-ready leadership cultures.

START BUILDING A FUTURE-READY MINISTRY CULTURE

Ministry leaders can no longer rely on isolated planning or short-term responses. Strategic foresight equips entire teams to think long-term, adapt together, and lead with clarity.

The Incite Futures Labs provide the tools and frameworks your ministry needs to co-create a preferred future.





WHAT MAKES INCITE FUTURES LABS DIFFERENT?

Contextualized to Your Ministry

We collaborate with you to tailor foresight to your ministry setting, where biblical conviction and spiritual purpose guide decisions, utilizing foresight through common grace.

Learn Strategic Foresight

Gain essential foresight tools to understand change, surface assumptions, and make long-term thinking actionable.

Build a Future-Ready Team

We help you cultivate a culture where team members meaningfully contribute to strategic discernment and planning.

Facilitate Collaborative Thinking

Our scenario and strategy tools engage teams in shaping the future together.

Embed Ongoing Scanning and Learning

We help you integrate horizon scanning into decision-making rhythms for sustained adaptability.

STACKABLE INCITE FUTURES LABS

Each lab builds foresight capacity in your team while delivering real value on its own. Start with one. Stack the next when you're ready. Momentum builds over time.

ORIENTATION VIDEO CALL: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Before your first Incite Futures Lab, your team will join a one-hour virtual onboarding session to preview your futures-thinking journey.

INDEPENDENT ACTION PHASE: FORESIGHT PREPARATION

To prepare, you'll gather internal trends, issues, plans, and projections, review key moments in your ministry's history, and align around shared goals for collaborative foresight.

STACKABLE LAB 1: FORESIGHT FOUNDATIONS

This two-day lab introduces biblical foresight patterns, foundational tools, and horizon scanning. Your team will challenge assumptions, map plausible futures, and align long-term vision with strategy. You'll walk away with a good idea of where the future might lead and some preliminary scenarios you can use.

Independent Action Phase: External Scanning

Over the next 4–6 weeks, your team will conduct horizon scanning, monitoring signals, trends, and drivers across social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, educational, and spiritual domains. You will develop and document strategic awareness, setting the stage for deeper analysis and scenario building.

STACKABLE LAB 2: STRATEGIC SCENARIO DESIGN

If you're ready, you can add the next two-day lab into your foresight journey. Your team will develop tailored scenarios grounded in real-world signals and ministry realities. You'll identify key uncertainties, explore probable and possible futures, and bring transitional scenarios back to your team to test and refine strategic options.

Independent Action Phase: Stakeholder Engagement

Following Lab 2, your team will conduct 2–4 weeks of scenario testing with ministry stakeholders from your context. This feedback process ensures alignment, reveals blind spots, and sharpens strategic options.

STACKABLE LAB 3: INTEGRATION AND INNOVATION

Next in your foresight stack, include this advanced two-day session, your team will use your tested foresight scenarios to engage in a layered analysis to uncover new narratives and systems that support your preferred future. Then you'll apply backcasting to map strategic steps from the preferred future back to the present, giving you a roadmap to use with your agile planning

Independent Action Phase: Signal Monitoring

After Lab 3, your team will continue long-term horizon scanning, integrating signals into strategic decision-making. This will embed foresight as an ongoing leadership rhythm.

WHY STACKABLE MATTERS

Each Incite Futures Lab delivers real value, but when stacked, the impact multiplies.

Our modular design lets your team start small and build as you go. You don't need to commit to a long process upfront. Instead, you can engage one lab at a time, experience tangible outcomes, and decide when to take the next step.

Each lab equips your team with new foresight capacity, and each action phase helps embed that learning into your culture.

Start where you are. Stack what comes next.



About Chris Forbes

With over 35 years of research and strategy experience, Chris Forbes, DMin., equips faith-based nonprofits to anticipate change, identify trends, and develop forward-looking strategies. His work empowers leaders to lead with clarity, courage, and conviction in uncertain times.

Schedule your team's orientation today at ForbesStrategies.com

