In his many lectures, books, and articles, David Bosch has proved himself to be an able historian, interpreting the role of the church in the past. From time to time he is also – as many contributors to this volume attest – clothed in the robe of the prophet, calling the church faithfully and uncompromisingly to articulate the demands of the gospel in present-day South Africa. Sometimes, however, the professor from Pretoria allows himself to dream, to reflect on the future of the church, on discerning God's will for tomorrow's mission. It is my wish, for a moment, to stand with David Bosch doing just that, gazing into the crystal ball of the future.

**TOWARDS A.D. 2000**

I start by quoting from a beautiful colour brochure, published recently by one of the leading charismatic denominations in South Africa (Christian Community Centre 1988:1):

You are living in the greatest period in the history of the world! A leading U.S. periodical recently stated: “The press is missing the scoop of the century”.

Did you know that:

1. International facts seem to indicate our Lord's return by the year A.D. 2000?
2. Biblical history pinpoints the end of this century and millennium for the second coming of Christ?
3. The end-time harvest has already begun?
4. The 6 largest nations in the world and most of Latin America and Africa are experiencing a major historical awakening?
5. The major world ministries pinpoint A.D. 2000 for the completion of world evangelization objectives?
6. The Israelite year of Jubilee for its restoration is 1998?
7. The Great Commission could already have been fulfilled?
8. 80% of the present world population is now open to the Gospel?
9. End-time ministries are now reaching out around the world with activity to touch every life by A.D. 2000?
10. Every day you now minister could be your last?

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Enthusiasm for A.D. 2000 is by no means solely a South African phenomenon. On the contrary, expectations for the year 2000 are running high – not only in charismatic and Pentecostal circles, but also in mainline Protestant denominations, as well as in Catholic and Orthodox churches. One should therefore not be too surprised at reading the lines quoted above; the year 2000 has long been considered by many Christians the most likely terminus ad quem of God’s plans for our world. According to David Barrett, of 300 distinct plans conceived in history to complete world evangelisation, those referring to A.D. 2000 have numbered at least 70. Fifty of these plans are still alive today. Four international Protestant broadcasting agencies (TWR, FEBC, HCJB, ELWA) are sponsoring a radio plan, “The World by 2000”, with the specific aim “to provide every man, woman and child on earth the opportunity to turn on their radio and hear the gospel of Jesus Christ in a language they can understand... by the year 2000”. Similarly their Catholic counterpart, Lumen 2000, aims “to preach the gospel of Jesus to the uttermost parts of the earth, spreading the love of Jesus around the globe.” The World Literature Crusade plans to place Christian literature “in every home on earth by A.D. 2000”, while the Catholic Charismatic Office in the Vatican adopted as its goal: “To give Jesus Christ the 2000th birthday gift of a world more Christian than not... To give Jesus a 2000th birthday present of a billion new believers” (Barrett 1987b:443–449).

In paging through the latest editions of Christian newspapers and magazines – academic as well as popular – one cannot but gain the impression of the sense of urgency, of the burning expectation in the hearts and minds of church leaders and missiologists alike. In the editorial to the January/February 1988 edition of World Evangelization, Thomas Wang (1988:2) states: “Today we are witnessing a world wide army of church and para-church leaders, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, coming forth like a gigantic chorus, heralding the evangelization of the world before the year 2000!”

Is it realistic? Can it be done?, asks David Hesselgrave in the next edition of World Evangelization. He answers his own question, after considering a number of relevant facts and figures, in the affirmative: “Actually, if all that God has placed at the disposal of his church were to be marshalled for the effort, there seems to be no reason why the whole world would not be evangelized by the year 2000” (Hesselgrave 1988:13–14). When reading these enthusiastic statements it sometimes seems as if we are back in the heady days of the Student Volunteer Movement, of Arthur Pierson and John Mott, of Edinburgh 1910, when the rallying cry was sounded: “The evangelization of the world in this generation!”

The inimitable Ralph Winter, with his customary computer printouts at hand, illustrates the countdown to the year 2000, when the last of the remaining people groups are to be reached for Christ: In January 1987,
17 000 groups still had to be reached with the gospel; by January 1995, 6 000 groups will remain unreached, but by January 2000 every single people group will have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ! (Winter 1988:13–14).

David Barrett, in an article on “Forecasting the future in world mission”, opted for a more cautious approach. It is barely possible and highly improbable, if one looks at the European and American churches’ record in history, that such a goal – evangelising the world by A.D. 2000 – could be reached, and even if possible and probable, it may well not be preferable for them to succeed in their present Western-dominated modes (Barrett 1987b:442).

Christians may have different opinions on the meaning of the Year 2000 for missions – readers of Missionalia are bound to harbour the most divergent ideas on the subject – but the point I would like to make is this: whereas many a secular prophet cringes when he thinks about the future, when commentators and academics agonise about Zeitgeist, and fin de siècle experiences, when conversations tend to concentrate on such notions as Millennium Fears and Future Shock, Christians by and large harbour more positive feelings about the twenty-first century; a far cry from the irrational apocalyptic fears that characterised the reaction of Christians at the end of the first millennium, many Christians are looking forward to something good and new that is bound to come when the second millennium ends.

**DISCERNING GOD’S WILL**

This inevitably leads us to the next question: how are Christians to prepare for the future? How do we discern the will of God for the church – and its mission – as we approach A.D.2000? What role do we envisage for the church as we enter the New Age, the third millennium, the Age of Information and Communication, the era of the postmodern human, being?

I am no prophet and claim no special insight into nor foreknowledge of future events. What I do want to do, however, is to offer, tentatively and with some trepidation, a few remarks about the future agenda of the church, to underline for the umpteenth time some of the challenges that face us on the road ahead. To put it in a nutshell, on its way to A.D. 2000 the church will be called, time and again to stand before a mirror, to take a long hard look at herself; and to walk to the window to take a fresh look at the world in which she lives – before moving to the door to venture out into the world . . .

**Mirror**

In obedience to the Lord, as it tries to understand God’s will for mission in
South Africa, the church of tomorrow will be called to the mirror. What will future Christians, our brothers and sisters of the twenty-first century, see?

A worldwide church

Future Christians are bound to see many, many faces staring back at them from the mirror. For, no matter how we judge the enthusiastic predictions of Ralph Winter and his kin on the spread of Christianity in the next decade, one thing is certain: millions upon millions of Christians in our own country and throughout the world, will be waiting to welcome A.D. 2000.

In his most recent update of the *Status of Global Christianity*, Barrett states that by the end of the century a full 2,130,000,000 people on six continents (34% of the world population), will consider themselves to be Christians. In Africa the corresponding number is 323,914,90 (Barrett 1989:20–21).

Of equal importance is the fact that the majority of faces smiling back from the mirror are bound to be black and coloured, rather than white. Gone for ever are the days when Christians were by definition thought to be European. In 1900, according to Barrett’s calculations, a full 50% of the world’s Christians lived in Europe and only 2% in Africa. In 1980 Europe had about 25% of the world’s Christians, and Africa 15%. By the end of this century Europe and Africa will each have about 20% of the world’s Christian population. In Europe and North America an average of 53000 people leave the Christian church each week. In Africa the net increase of Christians is about 115 000 per week! In South Africa, too, the church has grown in numbers: about 8 out of every 10 South Africans – the vast majority of them from Coloured and African backgrounds – are members of a church (Johnstone 1987:31–40).

One Church?

Future generations will probably refer to the twentieth century as the “ecumenical century”. And, indeed, much has been achieved during the past decades to bring Christians closer to one another, to bridge the traditional gaps between denominations and confessions. The founding of the World Council of Churches, the establishment of many confessional synods, alliances and federations, the building of bridges between Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians alike, is no mean achievement.

In South Africa, too, the ecumenical spirit has made itself felt. Many churches have joined forces in the S.A. Council of Churches as well as in other organisations, a number of denominational mergers have been effected, and there is increasing co-operation between Christians in many fields.
David Bosch (I am pleased to say), has devoted a large part of his energy and of his writings to this very aim – to bring Christians from different cultural and denominational groups together, to come to know and trust one another. Many ecumenical initiatives in South Africa, ranging from the South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA) to the National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR) depended heavily on his leadership. In his personal life he suffered the pain and anguish, sometimes even rejection, that often go with being a “bridge” of reconciliation between people or between political and denominational groups.

But, as we approach the twenty-first century, we still have to travel a long way on the road towards unity, to come to the point where all Christians – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, East and West, white and black – kneel down to confess our mutual guilt of disunity, and to reach out to one another in enjoyment of the oneness of the body of Christ. Meetings we are bound to have, discussions will continue far into the twenty-first century, documents will still be printed and distributed by the ecclesiastical industry, but are we ever to experience the fulfilment of the Lord’s prayer: “May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me” (John 17:21)?

**Twenty-first century theology**

It does not need a prophet to foretell that at least some of the individuals whose images we will see reflected in the mirror will carry with them thick and heavy theological textbooks – perhaps not books, but data on microchips and floppy disks. It seems that from the Ascension to the Second Coming of the Lord, the church has been, and will continue to be, blessed and afflicted by that particular subspecies of *homo sapiens*, sometimes called *homo garrulans*, or in plain English, theologians.

There will be no lack of issues for them to grapple with. A relevant theology for the Age of Communication and Information, Space Age Hermeneutics, and many more. Many burning questions will be carried over from our century to the next, and the contribution of Third World theologians will prove to be of the utmost importance. To name but three examples: I have a feeling that the perennial question of what theology is really all about will be asked again and again in coming years. Many of our carefully phrased answers of the past may prove inadequate. Questions about the relationship between theology and the other disciplines of scientific research, between theology and ideology, between theology and myth, will continue to occupy the mind.

Secondly, the study of the *Theologia religionum*, which is such a thorny and often neglected subdivision of the missiology curriculum, will become a major field of study in years to come. Allow me to quote David Bosch (1986:12):
Discerning God’s will for mission

As I see it, the relationship between the Christian faith and other faiths and the legitimacy of Christian evangelism will be among the major issues facing us in the next decades. The Christian faith will have to compete in the market place of religion as never before.

Another theological issue to be faced (which is also a very practical one) within the community of churches, is that of proselytism. Where do the legitimate and necessary actions of evangelising and discipling stop, and where does a negative proselytising or “sheep stealing” begin? Major questions are at issue here: To what extent do churches trust one another to be legitimate vehicles of the Christian faith? Should the active evangelistic witness of one church be directed at members of another church at all – as is happening all over the world, also in our own country? (Van Houten 1988:1–27).

Window

The Church of the future, however, does not only need to look at her own reflection in the mirror; it will time and again have to move to the window, for a hard and fresh look at the world outside. What will we see?

The people

Outside the window a multitude of people will be seen. The world’s population will rise from 5.1 milliard in 1988 to a massive 6.25 milliard by A.D. 2000. As we have seen, possibly 34% of these people are expected to belong to the Christian church, but that leaves 66% – a staggering 4.13 milliard human beings – who will not know or acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour! The number of persons belonging to no religion whatever – including atheists and secularists – will have increased from less than 3 million in 1900 to more than one milliard in the year 2000. African nations are expanding fastest. During the next thirty years, as Time Magazine (1989:34) projects, the population of Kenya (annual growth rate: 4%) will jump from 23 million to 79 million; Nigeria’s population (growth rate 3%) will soar from 112 million to 274 million (1989:34).¹

In South Africa the population will be 37.4 million in 1990 and will grow to more than 47 million by the turn of the century.

The cities

Directly related to the population explosion is the phenomenon of

urbanisation. The majority of faces looking back at us through the window will be city dwellers. The latter half of the twentieth century has seen a massive increase in the number of large cities. In 1900, the world had 400 “metropolises”, defined as cities with a population of more than 100,000. Only twenty were “megacities”, of over 1 million each, and only two (London and New York) were “supercities”, with over 4 million inhabitants. By 1986 these had mushroomed to 1780 “metropolises” (over 100,000 people), 286 “megacities” (over 1 million people), 46 “supercities” (over 4 million people) and 14 “supergiants” (over 10 million people). By A.D. 2000 the number of “megacities” will reach 433! Formidable metropolitan giants like Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Bombay, Calcutta, Jakarta, Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Los Angeles will shape the mission context of the future.

Clearly these statistics offer a challenge to us. According to Greenway and Monsma (1989:xi), the cities of the world have become “the new frontier of Christian Missions”. To minister effectively in today’s urban world, Ray Bakke (1987:51–75) adds, one needs “a theology as big as the city” itself. James Scherer (1987:46) writes:

A new urban style of mission along with requisite training for Christian survival in great cities will be demanded. On the one hand, cities with their anonymity and secular atmosphere will offer nearly impenetrable barriers to mission activities. On the other hand, cities with greater freedom are less likely to be places of persecution, and their cultural pluralism will facilitate the rapid movement of the gospel. It may well be true that mission in the twenty-first century will be won or lost in the battle for the soul of big cities.

The poor and the hungry

“You will always have the poor with you”, Jesus said in the first century A.D., and in the twenty-first century, that will still hold true. Many of the men, women and children we see shuffling past the window will be extremely poor, for widespread poverty and starvation will characterise much of the future world. The gap between the rich and the poor, between rich and poor nations, will widen. The sombre truth of a Latin American proverb “the rich get richer and the poor have children”, is already providing the backdrop against which the church has to work.

In many Third World countries growth rates are outstripping the national ability to provide the bare necessities of life – housing, fuel and food. Horrifying images of starvation in north eastern Africa have captured world attention. In Mozambique 40 000 babies starve to death each day. In India, according to government reports, 37% of the people cannot buy enough food to sustain themselves. Shri B.B. Vohra, an Indian official, warns: “We may be well on the way to producing a subhuman kind of race where people do not have enough energy to deal with their problems” (Time Magazine 1989:34).

The publication of the Report of the Second Carnegie Commission on
Discerning God's will for mission

Poverty has once again highlighted the extent of the problem of the poor in South Africa at the close of the twentieth century. The shocking data compiled by Wilson and Ramphele (1989) underscore the fact that the plight of the homeless, the poor, and the hungry will remain on the churches' agenda far beyond A.D. 2000.

How are Christians to alleviate poverty on a local and international level? How are the churches to address the ethical problem posed by the presence of the poor, and of the super rich? Moreover, how will the chronic poverty in many countries across the globe influence the work of the churches themselves? Insufficient funding, inflation, underdevelopment and low productivity will make it difficult for churches in many Third World nations to achieve self-reliance, to participate in the mutual sharing of personnel and resources for mission. To what extent will churches from affluent nations be able to provide relief and long-term assistance?

The sick

What demands will health care make on the church in the future? For, as is the case with the poor, the sick and the infirm too will be with us always. What new avenues for medical missions will be opened to the church? Clifford Allwood (1989) has referred to the problem of AIDS, the "greatest disaster ever to befall the human race". Most serious observers and epidemiologists believe that the AIDS pandemic began in Africa – in Central Africa, to be more specific, probably on the shores of Lake Victoria – about a decade ago. And if only half of the grim projections concerning the tidal wave of the "slim disease" come true, the effects will truly be devastating to Africa. If a cure cannot be found – and none is in sight – all of the statistics and projections of population growth mentioned above could prove to be horribly wrong. To quote a few examples: In Burundi 10% of the entire population have been infected with the HIV virus; in the Central African Republic the figure is at least 8%. In Malawi, experts say, the percentages are even higher. More than 800 miners from neighbouring countries working in South African mines have been tested sero-positive, the large majority coming from Malawi. In Zaire, 33% of all in-patients at Mama Yemo Hospital tested sero-positive in January 1986. Satellite photographs seen in 1987 by researchers show the bush already closing in on roads and depopulated villages in Zaire. Government officials in different African states are only now beginning to realise the extent to which AIDS is going to influence the future of the continent. Government administration, industry, banking, the military, health care and service budgets, even national unity are equally endangered by this new monster (Nagle 1988:1–8, cf Edelston 1988; Meiring 1989:155–167).

How will the Christian community react? Ministering to the sick, caring for the family, education, prevention, (to quote Allwood again) are not the
prerogatives of Christian doctors, it is—and in future will continue to be—the duty of the whole Christian community (Allwood 1989:123–124).

The new demons

Political instability and authoritarian political systems on both the left and the right will still be the order of the day in many parts of the world during the twenty-first century. One can imagine hosts of people, walking by our imaginary window, either bearing slogans on placards or worried frowns on their foreheads. Coups d'etat, military dictatorships and violence will continue to fill the headlines of future newspapers.

Will Africa experience more peace and progress in future? “Prospects for a sudden outbreak of stability in Africa are not bright”, says the American author Chester Nagle, pointing to recent history: since the 1960s ninety African leaders have been deposed in take-overs, purges and assassinations; seventy-two violent coups were successful, and during every year since 1963 there has been at least one violent change of government (Nagle 1988:1–8).

What the future holds in store for South Africa remains to be seen. Apartheid has to go, the demon of racism has to be exorcised radically. Nearly all Christian communities in the country—also the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in its 1986 policy statement on Church and Society—are in agreement on that. But getting rid of apartheid is easier said than done. The way in which the recent elections were fought in the country and the reaction of many Whites to the reform initiatives of State President F.W. de Klerk, bear ample witness to that. But apartheid has to die—and let us hope and pray that by A.D. 2000 the funeral will already have taken place. But does that mean that Utopia will have arrived? What political and social systems will take its place? Will we live in an ideology-free country, with stability and prosperity and a Bill of Rights protecting the freedom of every citizen?

It seems to me that the prophetic voice of the church will be as necessary in the future as it has been in the past. The struggle for justice and reconciliation will remain on the church’s agenda, not only in our country, but across the world, right to the day of judgement. Every generation will have to exorcise its own demons.

A dying planet?

Looking at the multitudes filing past the window of the future, one needs to look beyond the people, at the street on which they walk, at the trees (or absence of them) along the road, at the smoke and the smog, at the filth

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around the corner, at our dying planet Earth. Ecological issues will be in the minds of all thinking people of the future. What are we doing to our planet? This wondrous globe has endured for some 4.5 billion years, but its future is threatened by humanity's reckless ways: overpopulation, pollution, wasted resources, and wanton destruction of natural habitats. In some quarters an accusing finger is lifted against the church as being partly responsible for the ecological dilemma, for humanity's predatory relationship with nature. The Judaeo-Christian tradition with its one-sided emphasis on the words of Genesis “fill the earth and subdue it”, it is said, made it possible for believers to use nature as a convenience. Christianity “which paved the way for the development of technology”, Thomas Scanton (1989:15f) writes, “may at the same time have carried the seeds of the wanton exploitation of nature that often accompanied technical progress”. Doing mission in God's way means inter alia taking creation seriously, rediscovering humanity's relationship to and dependence on nature. Future missionaries and missiologists will have to develop a working knowledge of the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect, of carbon dioxide emissions and chlorofluorocarbon levels – to name but a few things!

The door

Ultimately, after gazing in the mirror and staring through the window, the church will have to move to the door and out into the world. For, if we read our Bibles carefully, that is precisely what God wants from us: not to isolate ourselves from the world like Jonah, sitting on the sidelines, waiting for the destruction which is sure to come, but rather to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the incarnation of God in this world, to become the light, the salt and the leaven of this world, healing the sick, empowering the weak, saving the lost of the new age.

In the final pages of what is probably David Bosch's most widely read book till now, Witness to the World, he describes what it would mean for the church to move out into the world (1980:240–248). May I close my article by quoting a few salient lines?

The Church owes the world faith. In her mission she calls people to faith in Christ, that they, while still in life, should “cease to live for themselves, and should live for him who for their sake died and was raised to life”... we know that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, has enlisted us in the “service of reconciliation”... and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.

The Church owes the world hope – for both this and the ultimate, new world. Because the Church knows that she is a commissioned witness of the coming new order, she has to erect signs of the Kingdom already... Someone who knows that God will one day wipe away all tears, cannot with resignation accept the tears of those who suffer and are oppressed now. If we believe that one day all disease will vanish, we cannot but begin to anticipate here and now the victory over disease in individuals and communities.

The Church owes the world love. The love she has experienced ought to be passed on to others. The love of Christ constitutes the model and the measure of the Church's love...
to the world. Christ's love revealed its deepest dimension on the Cross. It will not be different with the Church... The Cross is the hallmark of the Church, as it was of Jesus. The proofs of Jesus' identity were his scars. Because of them the disciples believed... Likewise, because of the scars of the Church the world will believe... (The Church) is called to live according to the example of the One who said, "Here I am among you like a servant".

* * *

Nobody says it will be easy to bear Christ's cross in A.D. 2000, but we will have to do it. It may cost us dearly. Barrett (1987a:98) projects that by the year 2000, 500 000 Christian martyrs annually will have to pay the ultimate price for doing God's will. But in spite of this Christians will continue doing so in faith and love and especially hope, expecting at every turn the advent of the Lord. It may well be that the he will come in A.D. 2000. It may be that he will tarry a little longer. But of one thing we may, joyfully, be sure: “Maranatha” – The Lord is coming!”

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