



Dwight Zscheile: We're in the innovation business

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“Innovation” is a term not typically associated with religious institutions, which tend to be oriented toward conserving and maintaining tradition. Yet at its heart, the Christian church is about innovation—embodying God’s new life, hope, and community for the world. It is time to claim this identity amidst powerful disruptive forces in today’s world.

The triune God’s mission is about innovation. God creates the cosmos from nothing and forms humanity for right relationships with God, one another, and the whole earth. When those relationships fall into estrangement, God patiently reforms community through Abraham and Sarah, Israel, Jesus, and the church. Jesus is the one in whom humanity is reborn (recapitulated). The church is a community of the Spirit giving witness to an alternative and hopeful future.

We live in a moment of profound social and cultural change fueled by digital technology and globalization. Organizations of all types are struggling to adapt to new patterns of belonging and participation. Many churches and church systems seem caught and at a loss, unsure what to do as established practices break down and people disengage. Long-treasured ways of connecting and supporting Christian communities do not seem meaningful or accessible to emerging generations or neighbors. Leaders try harder at the old patterns, but feel frustrated and drained by pushing against cultural currents beyond their control.

This is a moment to reenter the central stories of the faith, stories that are not about institutional success or progress, but God claiming and calling unlikely, fallible people into the adventure of God’s mission. This mission proceeds in the Bible through a great deal of messiness, error, and ambiguity, not the linear-sequential steps of a modern strategic plan. God is the great innovator, and God calls humanity into participation and partnership in that innovation. Fundamentally, we are not in control.

What does this mean for local churches and other Christian communities who find their communal life eroding amid these seismic cultural shifts taking place? We might take our inspiration from the stories of Abraham and Sarah, elders suffering the absence of children and a future, who are called by God into a nearly quarter-century of wandering before God's promise is fulfilled. We might reenter the stories of the prophets, who redescribe the world in light of God's presence and leadership in the face of empires and exploitation. We might look to Jesus, who relies upon the hospitality of the world as he embodies an alternative kingdom. We might indwell the narratives in Acts of the Spirit leading the apostles through improvised encounters with strangers as they share the hope of the gospel.

We might also learn from some of the best thinking about innovation that has emerged in recent years. As Peter Denning and Robert Dunham observe, innovation is the spread of a new practice in a community. It is less about leaders coming up with brilliant new ideas to sell to people than it is about listening empathetically to breakdowns in people's lives and collaboratively discovering new stories and practices that offer a way forward.[1] The work of innovation in the face of tough challenges for which there are no easy answers belongs among the people facing the challenge, not just leaders.[2]

Many clergy and other religious leaders feel pressure to fix the church. The last couple of generations have seen tremendous energy put into various attempts to do so (church renewal movement, church growth movement, church health/effectiveness, restructuring, church planting, revitalization). These have not addressed the deeper problems, in part because they have largely been leader-driven. They have also missed the point in a fundamental way.

The root challenge for Christian communities today is cultivating Christian faith and discipleship in a cultural environment that no longer supports it. It is not so much a question of *church* and culture, but a deeper question of *gospel* and culture: what does it mean to live a life oriented around the gospel of Jesus in contemporary culture? This question gets far less attention than questions of how to do church differently because in some ways it is harder to answer.

We can begin to do so by listening empathetically to people's lives and stories, hearing their longings and losses and reflecting together on where the gospel connects with them. We can experiment together with simple, accessible practices for spiritual formation and discipleship in daily life through which the gospel comes alive in us and for our neighbors. We can reorder congregational life around learning the gospel story and living these practices, knowing that unless we go deeper in this basic way, we have nothing unique to offer our neighbors or the world.

This requires a different way of leading. It is less about bringing energy to catalyze flagging participation in church programs and activities and more about tracing the energy of the Holy Spirit among the people of God. It is less about defining bold goals