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Innovation and the Local Congregation: Unleashing the Creative Power of Communities of Faith

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

INNOVATION AND THE LOCAL CONGREGATION:
UNLEASHING THE CREATIVE POWER OF COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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has been approved by
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To the communities of faith I have served who have shown me that congregations are endowed with creativity and invited by the Spirit to innovate ever new ways of embodying Jesus in every time and place.

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ABSTRACT

Pastors search for ways to help their communities of faith live into their ministry with more impact, creativity and joy. Many are frustrated by the root bound nature of most congregations tightly organized in a hierarchy that limits the ability to be nimble and contextual. At the same time, culture is becoming more participatory, collaborative and creative. Thriving organizations have tapped into this culture by designing their structure to foster innovation. This work offers an examination of such organizations, their leaders and the tools they use.

Chapter One discusses the cultural shifts of connectedness and participation. These shifts have happened at a time of significant decline for the church. The way local congregations are organized has limited their ability to capture the opportunity for growth inherent in this new culture. Chapter Two examines aspects of Lutheran theology that help understand how and why congregations should redesign their organization to thrive in this culture of participation and connection. Chapter Three takes a deeper look at the cultural shift towards participation. A social learning theory called “Communities of Practice” will frame the proposal found later in this work. Chapter Four examines innovation, creativity and organizational design. Chapter Five offers a study of innovative organizations and leaders. Their habits, mindsets and practices are transferrable to the context of congregational organization and leadership. Chapter Six proposes tools that congregations can use to become responsive to this new culture of participation; creating environments that promote connection, innovation and collaboration. The metaphor of congregation as a constellation of Communities of Practice will be expanded upon as an answer to the problem.

The successful strategists of the future will have a holistic, empathetic understanding of customers and be able to convert somewhat murky insights into a creative business model that they can prototype and revise in real time.

- ROGER MARTIN, Author

When I'm working on a problem, I never think about beauty. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.

- BUCKMINSTER FULLER

The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers.

- DANIEL PINK, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*

CHAPTER ONE:
THE CHALLENGE OF A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION

I was an unlikely seminary candidate. As an economics major in college, weighing options of law school or an MBA, I had no real vision of becoming a pastor. A summer spent in youth ministry prior to my senior year of college turned into a year of touring with a Christian band/youth ministry team and a year off from academics. I found myself in over 70 congregations that year, and fell in love with God's people and their stories, especially ones of congregational life. It was once said to me that an old Hebrew teaching held that the reason God made people is that God "loves stories." I understand that. God's people in community, sent to join God's work in the world became real and beautiful to me that year. From that experience, and some gentle encouragement from my home pastor (and a job as the youth director in my home congregation while I entered seminary) led me to a one-year trial run of seminary. I went convinced that they would not want me, nor would I want to be there. I was wrong on both counts.

My strengths, according to Gallup Strengthsfinders¹ are Maximizer, Achiever, Strategic, Competitive and Woo. My strengths are a hot collection of ambition and a fascination with how to make an organization the best it can be. I read Jim Collins

¹ Gallup Strengthsfinder® is a tool used by individuals and organizations to improve performance on the basis that individuals, teams and entire organizations succeed when they play to their strengths.

work “*Good to Great*”² as my second primary scripture and began to serve in a succession of interesting and varied congregations. My main talent emerged as getting people in the right places (the “right seats on the bus,” per Collins) doing the right things. The settings changed: at first a small, rural congregation searching for new life; then a mega-church transitioning from its long-time (40 years) legendary leader; followed by a decade in a suburban church plant as a mission developer; ten years in a 150-year old congregation in need of a turnaround; and most recently in a large, youthful congregation. This congregation had suffered a decade of failed leadership – affairs, poorly matched interims and short-term, mis-matched senior pastors. All of these calls required creativity of thought, leadership and design.

This work is a result of the questions I have wrestled with over the years and through these different congregational calls: how do we release the creative power of the congregation? Every congregation I have served was full of talented people, but the organizational culture and structures were discouraging the full participation of the people in the common mission they shared. A few stories will illustrate some of the common themes I experienced in each congregation.

“I Have No Gifts”

At the core of Lutheran theology is the sacrament of baptism. Much more than an initiation rite, baptism is seen as the place where our identity is cemented as a beloved child of God. The Spirit is given, and each person is proclaimed a uniquely gifted sister or brother in Christ, joined with the community of the faithful, the

² Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* (New York: Harper Business, 2001).

communion of the saints and Jesus in God's work in the world. Baptism is central to our entire life; identity, vocation, and belonging all flow from this sacrament.

My self-understanding as pastor has always been to remind people of their identity as a beloved, gifted, and unique child of God. God has endowed each person with a unique set of gifts and abilities, and, throughout a lifetime, calls each to a set of vocations in the world. Through these vocations, individuals become united to Jesus' mission in the world, glorifying God and serving their neighbor.

One of the core responsibilities of a community of faith is to help people see their *uniqueness*—a particular set of gifts, talents and abilities with which God has endowed them. One season, the congregation I was serving as Lead Pastor, designed a ministry celebrating the unique design of people who used their gifts to serve their neighbor. Individuals nominated others and told their stories. A large display was created, and over the course of weeks, many people of all ages were featured with their pictures and stories posted. For most, this was a great success, helping people see that they did not have to be a pastor, or serve on a committee in order to put their gifts to use. The stories were diverse, inspirational and easily accessible. The project accomplished, for many, exactly the purpose it was created for. People began to see themselves as uniquely gifted and useful to God and neighbor through their everyday lives. Kids, retirees, and people in the prime of their lives all saw stories just like their own. It was a great celebration of how we all make a difference in the world. Except for Helen.

I found Helen standing by the display one day with her arms crossed and a sad, disgruntled look on her face. "I don't like this much," she said. When I asked her

why, and after a bit of a conversation, she said “I don’t have any gifts, nothing special about me.” It was one of the saddest comments I ever heard. Over time, a few of us in leadership took every opportunity to reinforce the gifts we saw in Helen. She began to show up differently in the life of the congregation – more positive, more joyful. (One of the challenges of serving primarily upper Midwest Lutherans is that there is a strong Scandinavian tendency to avoid any appearance of “boasting”, which, in its extreme form, makes it hard for anyone to claim their giftedness, speak of gifts or lift up the gifts of others.

Over the years, I have encountered a lot of people like Helen, believing—but not often saying—the same thing about themselves: they think they are not gifted in any way useful to God. They are nothing special. Clearly, our theology gets lost somewhere between the baptismal font and real life.

A Chance to Create a Culture

Just prior to accepting the call to develop a congregation in the western suburbs of Chicago, I had been the Pastor of Adult Ministries in a mega church in the mid 90’s. Carl George had recruited this congregation for his work on MetaChurch,³ and we leaned into small group ministries. I started to author small group training materials, and was recruited for a side job developing tools for a para church organization called Church Innovations.⁴ In college, I was an economics major, and had studied the emergence of self-directed work teams in corporate America. When I

³ Carl F. George, and Warren Bird, *The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: F. H. Revell, 1994).

⁴ <http://www.churchinnovations.org/>.

started working on small groups, it was clear that our attempts to link them into a traditional Lutheran church and its system of committees were not working. The committee structure was too formal and took too long to make decisions. Small group leaders were generally not interested in formal structures and did not have time to spend in committees. My background in self-directed work teams and the inspiration of George's Meta-Church model started to merge with the needs of our small groups. For two years, I experimented with running small groups on the basis of one-year covenants that they would develop a coaching system that allowed for flexibility and responsiveness. Still, within the boundaries of this large congregation, we had to graft the emerging system of small groups onto the existing structure and culture of committees.

One of the nice things about being a church planter is that one can design a congregation from the beginning. When I left the mega church to begin the church plant, I took with me the impulse for self-directed teams and groups. As the church plant grew, it did not follow the model constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) with its requisite committee structure. Nor did we adopt a staff-led model of ministry development (mainly due to a limited budget—little did we know this would be a great decision). Instead, we created a congregation based entirely on self-directed groups and teams. Groups tended to be organized around community and learning, and teams around tasks and service. Once two or three people identified an interest in an area of ministry that fit within our mission,⁵ we

⁵ We used the concept of “nesting vision,” like Russian dolls that “nest” within each other. The congregation had an articulated mission, and any group or team that could articulate a mission for itself that “nested” within the larger vision of the congregation, was authorized by the Council.

formed a group or team. The team wrote a covenant stating its mission, work plan and group commitments, and then it began its work and life together.

The art of this was to provide just enough support (information, money, communication, and coaching) for the group/team to function without exerting too much control.⁶ Over time, we became aware of further needs for this structure to work. It became apparent that we needed to give some of our teams/groups more tools to help them relationally, offer a greater ability to connect with new people, and provide ways to share learning and support with one another.

The Concept of Unique Design

A few years later, now at a congregation nearing its 150th anniversary, I worked with a very creative, gifted individual named Jody. She had a background in human relations, and through several conversations, she expressed interest in starting a new ministry that would help people identify their giftedness and call in the world. Under her leadership, we began to use Gallop's Strengthfinders work to help our group/team leaders identify their own gifts, and then, those of the rest of the group/team. People responded with gratitude for identifying their gifts and helping them gain understanding of how they could be used at work, home and in the ministry of their group or team. Differences of gifts became normalized, and each team member was seen as making a unique contribution to the work of the team. Group covenants were re-worked to list the gifts of the various team members, and the

⁶ I once learned an "empowerment equation" that went something like this: empowerment = information x resources x independence x communication. If any of the elements were missing, empowerment = 0.

vocabulary of strengths became commonplace. As with many contemporary workplaces, we became a strengths-based organization.⁷ It was a big step forward. The work of teams and groups became richer, roles became clearer, and everyone had reason to name and claim their uniqueness. People who previously thought they lacked gifts needed for ministry began to see that their gifts fit into a big mosaic of giftedness that served the congregation and its ministry well.

We began to experiment with a more profound tool, the Enneagram. Using the work of Richard Rohr,⁸ the Enneagram goes even deeper than Strengthsfinder to explore a person's unique design. Trainings, workshops and coaching sessions allowed many of our group/team leaders to become more effective leaders at church and out in the world. A richer understanding of difference led to a greater appreciation for the gifts of every person. The Enneagram allowed us to use language of spiritual growth and a variety of spiritual practices to help people grow in faith and grace.

The tools of Strengthsfinders and the Enneagram proved to be a perfect fit for a congregation organized around self-directed groups and teams. It gives the groups and teams language to appreciate what each person brings to the common mission and lifts up diversity of strengths as an advantage and source of strength as opposed to a matter of division. It helps a team or group understand how to communicate and function well as a group (think of Paul's analogy of the interdependencies of the body

⁷ In 2015, the Gallup organization analyzed 49,000 business units representing 1.2 million employees in 45 countries as an example of how many organizations are now "strengths-based," according to http://www.gallup.com/services/193427/strengths-meta-analysis-2015.aspx?utm_source=gsc&utm_campaign=201612homepagetest&utm_medium=ourdatabutton

⁸ Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 2001).

in 1 Corinthians 12) and see that every person has a place in the community and its mission.

The Culture of Participation: Connect, Collaborate, and Create

At this point in my ministry I entered the Doctor of Ministry program at George Fox Theological Seminary, now Portland Seminary. Throughout my career, I experienced the frustration of leading congregations bound to old structures of committees and boards and saw people bored and disinterested in the ministry of congregations that they could not find a place in. I also saw the power of groups/teams that were self-directed, nested within the mission of the congregation, but apart from the dead-end process of committees. Strengthsfinders and the Enneagram demonstrated ways to identify the unique giftedness of every person. That vocabulary led to effective, life-giving teams. I did not exactly know why they were working, nor did I understand how ready the culture was for a new way of organizing and connecting. I was looking for a way to connect these dots. I had read a lot on organizational design, but needed some catalyst to help me move toward a solution.

Learning from Len Sweet, reading the amazing collection of diverse fields of study that he led us through, being able to explore my curiosity about organizational design was just the thing I was looking for. This program laid out for me a cultural narrative of how the world had changed because of the advent of the connectedness of the internet. From there, like the “adjacent possibilities” that Len liked to use to stimulate our imaginations, my learning began to unfold.

As personal-based computing exploded through the technological development of devices like the iPad and smartphones, our culture rapidly changed.

As the media exploded with new possibilities, it also re-mediated the world right before our eyes. The first generation of Web (Web 1.0) represented a huge step forward in connecting people all around the world. People could find like-minded and like-interested people located anywhere. Information was instantly available. Connections exploded. As Web 2.0 evolved, an era of collaboration and creativity arose. People could join together to produce work products, create art and work for social good. People went from being consumers of media to producers, sharing music, opinions, and art like never before. The new social media gave everyone a platform and a voice, and they used them. Quickly a whole generation of children was raised on this emerging media, and are digital natives, not content to be simply consuming media, but to master media, creating and using their abilities to connect like never before.

The rise of social media companies (Slate magazine online reported on July 29, 2016 that the five largest companies by market cap were Apple, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook)⁹ like Google, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, hardware manufacturers like Microsoft and Apple, as well as the device makers, and software developers and application producers began to tap into the culture they were creating. Innovation flourished, creating entire new industries from garages and basements. Talent and capital flowed to these engines of innovation, and the world changed. With the media these corporations created, and the work

⁹ Will Oremus, "The Latest Sign That Silicon Valley Has Conquered the World," *Slate Magazine*, July 29, 2016, accessed September 7, 2017, http://www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2016/07/29/the_world_s_5_most_valuable_companies_apple_google_microsoft_amazon_facebook.html.

environments they fostered, people's way of experiencing the world was literally re-mediated.

Every person now has the potential to be a content creator, a brand, a voice. Collaboration has become the norm as people work together across continents, platforms, and industries. The rise of niche markets happened because people can find one another now. Artists can send their creations out into the world with ease and find audiences previously unattainable. Globalization, with its enormous advantages and creative disruptions was fueled by the rise of connection and collaboration.

Also fueled by the new media and technology is the significant rise of innovation. IDEO¹⁰ and its competitors have created an industry around Design Thinking, first creating products, then organizations that capture the possibilities and spirit of innovation. Innovative organizations are nimble; they are more organically connected to the marketplace and are a talent-rich environment. Innovative leaders have new skillsets, including the ability to build and lead teams, foster collaboration and lead organizations that are both nimble and resilient.

What this means for the church is manifold. First, it has changed our audience, mission field, or customer (however you wish to label it). Generation X (Gen Xers) and millennials are not interested in organizations that are not easy to connect with, contribute to or create within. They expect the ability to participate. They wish to

¹⁰ **IDEO** is an international design and consulting firm founded in Palo Alto, California, in 1991. "Ranked as one of the most innovative companies in the world by business leaders in a global survey by Boston Consulting Group; Ranked #10 on Fast Company's list of the Top 25 Most Innovative Companies; Winner of 38 Red Dot awards, 28 iF Hannover awards, and more IDEA awards than any other design firm; Ranked #16 on Fortune's list of 100 most-favored employers by MBA students; Awarded the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum's National Design Award for Product Design "About IDEO." IDEO U, accessed September 7, 2017. <http://www.ideo.com/pages/ideo>.

make creative contribution, and they want to make a difference. Any organization that is built around a ‘sit and listen’ culture, a rigid hierarchy, or simply one that is unable to appreciate their uniqueness (differentness) is not one that American young people wish to be a part of. The church, by orientation and structure, has not figured out how to connect (pun intended) with digital natives. Too static, too interested in self-preservation and too slow to engage with them, the church looks like an unhelpful relic, not to mention that much of the church today stands in judgment of this generation in very significant ways¹¹.

I saw how people responded to the language of unique design and strengths-based ministry, witnessed how powerful it is in people’s lives to connect their baptism with their vocational call, and saw the power of self-direction of groups and teams. Could it be that the cultural shift towards participation, connection and innovation was not only bringing the church closer to extinction, but perhaps held the clue to its return to vibrancy? What tools can help in this? What theological concepts might be rediscovered and brought to bear as a response to the changing culture? Is there a new way to ‘be’ the church that is inviting to this rising culture of digital natives?

Web 2.0 and the Making of Meaning

¹¹ See this Rachel Held Evans recent blog post on sexuality/gender issues: “When asked by The Barna Group what words or phrases best describe Christianity, the top response among Americans ages 16–29 was “antihomosexual.” For a staggering 91 percent of non-Christians, this was the first word that came to their mind when asked about the Christian faith. The same was true for 80 percent of young churchgoers. (The next most common negative images: “judgmental,” “hypocritical,” and “too involved in politics.”)”” Rachel Held Evans, “How to Win a Culture War and Lose a Generation,” Rachel Held Evans, May 9, 2012, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/win-culture-war-lose-generation-amendment-one-north-carolina>.

Web 2.0 theory indicates that there is now a convergence of thought in these diverse disciplines that suggest that people discover meaning, learn about the world, experience community and create identity in radically new ways. People are much more interested in experience, participation and collaboration. This is true in all aspects of learning, work and community building. These new patterns challenge the church in many ways. The church has had long-standing practices of membership, faith formation, worship and organization that are significantly less participatory, experiential and collaborative. The way local congregations have been traditionally conceived and organized is ill suited for the present culture, much too rigid and unable to capture the creative power of the people. The leadership tasks of congregations do not match up to the ways in which people in a participatory culture organize to learn and work together.

As an illustration, one of the aspects of the mission of a local congregation is the task of helping people find meaning. Even in this basic task, the way in which we “do” church is often wanting because of the way in which people now seek to find meaning in this new culture:

We are meaning-seeking animals. We want to know who we are, what we can know, what we can hope for, why we were born. We seek meaning in the work we pursue, the relationships we forge, the homes we build, and the communities to which we belong. When we form congregations, participate in demonstrations, or volunteer in soup kitchens, we are really seeking meaning. This quest for meaning may be explicitly religious: an attempt to find meaning in life by looking to a traditional religion or by searching for a personal spirituality. But we may also look for meaning in a nonreligious setting, through wonders, scientific knowledge, and even political involvement. Whenever and however we seek meaning in life, whether in the religious or the secular world, the answers to the questions Who am I? and Why am I? define a theology—a special theology that is our very own.¹²

¹² Carol Ochs, *Our Lives as Torah* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 2–3.

People, individually and collectively, are in a constant search for meaning. Religious or not, they practice and develop theology daily as part of this search for meaning. The church has a tendency to not acknowledge this phenomenon, and prefers to imagine that all theological meaning-making happens within its sphere of influence. Clergy, seminary faculty, denominational leaders and others who constitute the professional teaching and preaching theologians of mainline denominations have always been interested in controlling meaning-making and preserving orthodoxy as they define it.¹³ Humans are meaning-making creatures, and that comes through a variety of ways: study, experience, tradition, and imagination to name a few. One must wonder how well the church engages, welcomes and embraces the meaning-making of the people inside and outside the church. The Reformation could be understood as a time when the church, through crises, was forced to acknowledge that the culture it was immersed in demanded that the church acknowledge the meaning-making of the people inside and outside of it. When the church no longer engages people in helpful ways in the task of meaning-making, it loses connection, relevance and its place in society. Today, with the rise of a culture of participation, it may be that the church faces a new reckoning with the meaning-making needs of the culture surrounding it. If, indeed, we are now in a culture of participation, the church must welcome such meaning-making in both form and substance. Later, this work will address the way in which the church is conceived and structured as an organization the specifics of meaning-making.

¹³ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Model Constitution for Congregations* (Chicago: E.L.C.A., 2009).

Current Web 2.0 theory would suggest that society is rapidly moving from a “sit back and be told” culture to a “making and doing” culture.¹⁴ In short, people expect to create meaning themselves, participate in experiences, collaborate with others and express themselves creatively. The resulting surge in creativity has resulted in the claim that we are currently experiencing the largest increase in human expressive creativity in history.¹⁵ In communities of faith that are rigid in design as well as practice, this cultural shift is a significant challenge.

In a recent study, a key finding centered on the lack of a welcoming of intellectual questioning and discussion about faith: “Christianity is not generally perceived to sanction a thoughtful response to the world. One comment illustrates this image: ‘Christianity stifles curiosity. People become unwilling to face their doubts and questions. It makes people brain-dead.’”¹⁶

In a participatory culture that encourages people to create content, express opinions, and find information from a wide range of sources, any organization that limits expression or participation faces a grim future. The emerging question is then how can a mainline congregation negotiate this shift in culture and become a place where individuals can legitimately collaborate, create, and participate in ways that will, inevitably, change the very nature and self-understanding of the congregation?

¹⁴ “Participation Culture, Creativity and Social Change,” accessed January 14, 2017, <http://davidgauntlett.com/portfolio/participation-culture-creativity-and-social-change/>

¹⁵ “How Cognitive Surplus Will Change the World” (Ted), accessed September 10, 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cognitive_surplus_will_change_the_world/discussion

¹⁶ David Kinnaman and Fermi Project, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 123.

A Congregation of Gen Xers, Digital Natives and their Children

At the end of 2014, I accepted a call to my current congregation. Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran Church is a 5,000-member community, and I was brought in after a decade of leadership churn and a series of “unfortunate events.” It is a very contemporary and innovative congregation, housed on an 80-acre campus. It has brought in several partners to the campus, including a YMCA facility serving the young families of this growing community (Scott County is one of the fastest growing communities in Minnesota¹⁷), a major retirement community with several levels of care, a 150-unit apartment complex that is now being built, and a shelter and halfway house for young people who have been trafficked. It is a campus designed to engage all generations, and it is living out its mission. There are 1,000 children from birth to eighth grade active in ministry. They and their young parents make this congregation one of the largest (4,800 members) and youngest (1,000 children from birth through eighth grade) in the entire Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

This is a congregation full of Generation Xers, millennials and their children. They are digital natives, and they live in a connected world that a typical Lutheran congregation is not organized for. The majority of these families are headed by parents who are both employed full-time. College educated professionals, their world is busy, connected and fueled by social media.

¹⁷ “Scott County was the fastest-growing county in Minnesota and one of the fastest growing counties in the United States during the last decade. From 2010 to 2014, the County’s population increased by 6.8 percent.” Accessed September 7, 2017. <https://www.scottcountymn.gov/443/Projected-Growth>.

The church I grew up in had legions of full-time volunteers that led Sunday school, vacation Bible school, and who populated the committees that did the work of the congregation. In contrast, for this congregation, time is the most precious commodity. People wish to contribute in measured ways that have visible impact. Individuals are also not identified with a denomination or familiar with the church culture of their parents. Parents are engaged in the lives of their children, which serves as the general organizational principle of the family. Wired and connected, members of this community find news and social groupings through the Internet; and use Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, text messaging, and the like to be informed, as well as to express themselves to the world. The maintenance of church culture or organizational structure is not a priority. Instead, Gen Xers and their children engage the congregation very differently than previous generations, and do not find typical structures of committees, boards and councils of interest.

Yet, digital natives need community and yearn to make a difference. They want a life full of meaning, necessitating a working theology that frames the world they experience. Human and in need of the same things Jesus offered the world of the first century, Gen Xers and their children are simply products of a very different culture than previous generations, now requiring that the church, if it is to remain relevant at all, change the way it engages with them.

All around the church, other venerable institutions such as libraries, bookstores, retail malls,¹⁸ political parties, public schools, colleges and universities,

¹⁸ “From rural strip-malls to Manhattan’s avenues, it has been a disastrous two years for retail. There have been nine retail bankruptcies in 2017—as many as all of 2016. J.C. Penney, RadioShack, Macy’s, and Sears have each announced more than 100 store closures. Sports Authority has liquidated, and Payless has filed for bankruptcy. Last week, several apparel companies’ stocks hit new

news organizations, museums and zoos have gone through similar trauma as they engage these generations. Some have found ways to re-imagine themselves and deliver their mission. Others have died or are disappearing. New organizations have come from nothing¹⁹ and now rule the world. Will the church and the local congregation find a way forward? It has reimagined itself before. The Spirit has led it out of other wilderness. There is hope.

Shepherd of the Lake provides a great opportunity to innovate. After years of struggle, there is openness to something new. After several years of successive leadership changes, the organizational design was thin. I had the opportunity to re-imagine how the congregation was organized, how staff was in relationship to the congregation, and could attract new people into leadership. The culture was open to be re-shaped. There were a lot of people, which meant there were many diverse gifts, passions and talents to be discovered and deployed for mission. The problem at the heart of this work exists here in this context, and the need to answer this problem and seize the opportunity that lies inherent in it is the mandate the leadership of this congregation and me. Like the new coach of a talent-laden team after a season of

multi-year lows, including Lululemon, Urban Outfitters, and American Eagle, and Ralph Lauren announced that it is closing its flagship Polo store on Fifth Avenue, one of several brands to abandon that iconic thoroughfare.

So, what the heck is going on? ...several trends—including the rise of e-commerce, the over-supply of malls, and the surprising effects of a restaurant renaissance—have conspired to change the face of American shopping.”

Derek Thompson, “What in the World Is Causing the Retail Meltdown of 2017?” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/04/retail-meltdown-of-2017/522384/>.

¹⁹ As an example, look at Amazon v. Walmart. “In April of 2017, Amazon was valued at more than \$430 billion. That’s nearly twice the market value of its rival Walmart, which has a market cap of a mere \$220 billion.” Paul R. La Monica, “Amazon Worth Almost Twice as Much as Walmart,” *CNNMoney*, April 4, 2017, accessed September 7, 2017, <http://money.cnn.com/2017/04/04/investing/amazon-stock-900-alltime-high/index.html>.

misfortune, I had the opportunity to imagine a new future, and the team to bring it about. What was needed was a way to understand how to engage this emerging culture of participation with the tools of innovation and creativity.

Lutheranism: Any Help to be Found There?

History repeats itself, it is said. Lutherans have a self-understanding of being a “reforming movement of the church catholic.” This means that we are (justly) proud of our identity as a church birthed from re-formation. Lutherans have a rich theological heritage that has contributed important concepts to the broader church. *In a moment like this, where the culture of the broader society has changed so significantly as to be leaving the church behind, stuck in a previous world view, a reformation might just be in order.* Is there anything in Lutheran theological tradition that we can pull some insight from to serve as a way forward in engaging the people we are asked to serve?

Lutherans are a sacramental tribe. We are centered around the baptismal font and the Lord’s Table. At the font, we are given our identity as beloved children of God, and we are joined to Jesus’ mission in the world. For Lutherans, baptism is therefore always the first place to look for insight to almost every theological problem. Later in this work, the Lutheran understanding of baptism will help illuminate that every person is a unique design. In our current culture, the desire for people to contribute something unique to their work, their neighborhood, and the world in general this idea of unique design will resonate. In a culture that invites creativity, there is an assumption that every person has a voice, a gift to share and a word to express. Baptism, and the unique giftedness of every child of God, gives this

understanding a theological foundation. The challenge for the church is to re-discover that diversity is a strength, not a point of division.

Martin Luther coined the phrase “the priesthood of all believers” and contributed volumes of work on the topic of vocation. In a culture of creativity and collaboration, people no longer want to “sit down and be told.” The priesthood of all believers is an understanding that every person has something valuable to contribute and joins a diverse people in a common mission. Somehow, the Lutheran church I have experienced throughout my life has forgotten the important insight of the priesthood of all believers. More accurately, we have gotten good at repeating the nostalgic words and yet do nothing as an organization to have the words come to life. The power of entire congregations actually living out the promise held in the concept of the priesthood of all believers would be incredibly vibrant, life-giving and impactful. It is not often seen in the present life of the Lutheran church.

As previously mentioned, Lutherans are justifiably proud of their reformation heritage. To be a church of the Reformation is to be inquisitive, free from bondage and even long-held ways of conceiving ministry and mission, bold in experimentation and fearless and trusting in the leading of the Spirit. Perhaps it is in the reclaiming of our re-forming heritage that will give us permission to try new ways of being the church and unafraid of experimenting with ways to engage people in the midst of a changing culture. Innovation requires embracing change and failure as the only ways to experience learning and growth as an organization.

Long would be the argument about what was the central or most important insight that Luther offered the world. For many, it would be his concept of vocation

and how one's vocation is always for the sake of the neighbor. The concept of vocation is sorely missing in our world. A vocation, a sacred calling that suits our unique giftedness and serves our neighbor is the secret to a meaningful, purposeful and joyful life. For a generation that looks to other narratives (celebrity, success, popularity, and wealth to name a few), a sense of vocation is a liberating gift. Both Jesus and Luther spoke at length about how we are to serve our neighbor in love, and it is through our vocation that people can experience the deep joy that happens in life when their giftedness is joined to a life in service to the neighbor. This concept of vocation is a helpful understanding to lead us to a better organizational design for our congregations and a better self-understanding of how to engage people who wish to collaborate, create and connect.

A lesser known insight of Lutheranism is the idea of freedom from and freedom for. We are good at proclaiming grace and well known for our articulation of how God's saving love is a free gift that liberates us from the bondage to sin. We are good at proclaiming grace as freedom from. Yet it also represents a freedom for living into your vocation by using your unique giftedness for the glory of God and in loving service to your neighbor.

All of these Lutheran concepts will be examined more closely in the next chapter. As a whole, they represent a foundation of theological understanding that can be drawn upon to give our congregations a better sense of how to engage with the people who live in this new culture of connection, collaboration and creativity.

With all re-formations, one has to start with foundations and insights. This paper will look at innovation and various tools to help imagine how to better engage

with people of this new culture. Behavior will follow theology. For too long, Lutherans have not used their best theological insights to guide their people into this new day. By re-memorizing ourselves to our theological heritage, we can possibly imagine a reformation in our time and place.

Innovative Organizations and Leaders

Looking beyond the church, out to the rest of the world, it is relatively easy to see the organizations that are thriving in this new day of connect, create and collaborate. They are the innovators, the organizations designed to accommodate rapid change, those who have learned how to harness the potential inherent in the revolution that has taken place over the last few decades.

One can learn from those who have found the keys to thriving in this new world, for example Apple.²⁰ It exists in the junction of the rise of personal computing, social media, mobile platforms such as the iPhone and iPad, content platforms like iTunes, and the ubiquitous apps (such as Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram) that fuel and entertain the world. An examination of Apple led me to discover IDEO, a design firm that rose to prominence through its work with Apple on its first mouse, an at-the-time revolutionary design.

IDEO is a leader in the field of Design Thinking. They have developed processes that are now used by for-profit and non-profit organizations all around the world. The concept of Design Thinking focuses on the behavior of the customer and

²⁰ “Apple’s cash reserve is now more than \$250 billion, which is larger than the market cap of General Electric.” Christine Wang, “Apple’s Cash Hoard Is Now Bigger than the Market Cap of GE,” CNBC, May 2, 2017, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/02/apples-cash-hoard-swells-to-record-256-8-billion.html>.

the customers' interaction with the designed product or service. Rather than beginning with "people should want this" and pushing a product, Design Thinking reverses that process by examining how people actually behave. Design Thinking helps organizations think through why and how they provide services and product. Most of us have benefited from being the subjects of Design Thinking, and use products and services that have resulted from the process (think of your experience at any Disney park or performance. Disney is famous for "The Disney Experience", which is a result of a Design Thinking, customer experience-centric way of corporate innovation). Congregations, bound in the "we have never done it that way" mindset have lacked the imagination to use tools like Design Thinking, or customer mapping to conceive of new ways of doing ministry and engaging people in their faith walk or mission in new ways. As these tools are available and applicable to congregations, congregations can find help in utilizing the habits and processes of innovative organizations and leaders.

Later in this work, the three spaces of innovation—inspiration, ideation and implementation—will be examined. Providing the motivation and desire to change, inspiration comes from the problem that the organization is trying to answer. Ideation is the process of generating and developing ideas, and implementation is the move from concept to reality. Innovation is a sort of dance or interaction between these three spaces. What has changed the most during the rise of this new economy is the pace of iteration. Innovative companies dance between these three spaces quickly and bring rapid iteration to the process so that they "fail quickly" and learn rapidly. Prototypes and small-bore experiments are used regularly to test ideas and to develop

strategies for implementation. The organizational values that support an organization-wide culture of innovation require significant shifts of traditional church mindsets about change, risk, failure and success.

All voices in an organization need to be valued and heard; risk-taking needs to be embraced; failure needs to be seen as necessary learning; time and space for experiments and thoughts to incubate needs to be created; and a general mindfulness on the part of the organization and its people to observe and see what is really going on is critical. These are not the attributes of traditional church culture. The question for the church is not if it should adopt a culture of innovation, but how fast can it do so. It is not only a question of organizational survival, but it is also a missional question. It is not unlike the mind of Paul, the first century entrepreneur for Jesus, as he imagined a community of people living in the Way of Jesus very differently from place to place. Mindfulness involves seeing: the unique gifts of individuals and communities; the diversity of gifts as a strength, not a matter of division; and the interconnectedness of diverse gifts that serve the whole; as well as a lack of fear when presented with challenges or obstacles. For a people who “should not fear,” the church has feared change. In today’s culture more than ever, change and adaptability are required as the price of admission to connect with people. It is not a barrier; it is an invitation to participation.

Communities of Practice: An Accidental Discovery.

After taking a deep dive in understanding our connecting, creating and collaborating culture, looking through the Lutheran attic of theological ideas and studying innovative organizations and leaders, I began to wonder about how to

express in a form or a metaphor a possible solution for the problem of disconnect between congregational life and the culture that surrounds it. The social learning theory called “Communities of Practice” was an accidental revelation to me. On a search for more information on self-directed work teams, I began to come across the term “Communities of Practice.” Researching it at some length, it became apparent that this concept was a perfect bridge between first century Christian community and the culture of participation we are in now.

First century followers of Jesus were invited into a way of living, not into an institution. They were called “brothers and sisters” in a radical new way of being community, in which they were mentored and encouraged by companions in a new way of life. Newcomers were valued and honored. There were rituals and other reifications of what this life looked like and taught what this way of life was about. There were mentors, teachers, disciples and students. Learning this way of life was both a communal and individual experience. The community was based around *practice*—the practice of living in the Way of Jesus. It was social learning.

Communities of Practice are identified today as a social learning phenomenon. They have parallel characteristics as the first century communities that followed in the Way of Jesus. In Communities of Practice, learning is social, lived and experienced. There are rituals, reifications, and trajectories of participation. Newcomers are valued. Mentors are embraced. In many ways, which will be detailed later, Communities of Practice serve as a fabulous model of how congregations can gain a new self-understanding in this age of participation. In Communities of Practice, creativity is encouraged, participation by all is a given, collaboration is the

way life is done and innovation happens organically. In many ways, one could attribute much of the explosive rise of the People of the Way to the reality that they were essentially Communities of Practice. Perhaps a return to such a way of understanding congregational life and learning and practicing the faith, as opposed to a community organized around institutional survival and tradition, is a way to new life for the church.

A New Metaphor and New Tools

Along with this new understanding that a congregation is a Community of Practice (or, in some cases, a constellation of Communities of Practice), will be the adaptation of new tools to help these Communities of Practice function well. Tools will be needed to help individuals discover the most important truth in their life: Their identity as beloved children of God, joined with Jesus' mission to love the neighbor. This is really an old tool, the centrality of baptism and the work of the Spirit. Tools will be needed to help each person understand their unique design. In this work, Strengthsfinders from the Gallop organization and the Enneagram as interpreted by Richard Rohr will be used as examples of how congregations can help people understand their unique design. These tools are also important for self-directed teams and groups to live out their mission using all of their gifts. Examples of how teams and groups can be an important aspect of congregation as Community of Practice will also be given. Design Thinking will also be offered as a major tool for congregations to live as Communities of Practice and re-imagine mission in an age of participation, harnessing the creative power of their people. This paper will also offer up customer mapping as a way of understanding and engaging with a population of people who are less "churched" and who are used to interacting with organizations that are savvy to the lives of modern people.

These new tools will be offered as examples of how local congregations can begin to imagine themselves in radical new ways that have much in common with the earliest beginnings of the Way of Jesus: church as Community of Practice, church as

innovator, and church engaged with the world it now finds itself in, rather than a church that lives nostalgically in an age gone by.

The Problem with Change, the Hope of Change

Many leaders and congregations resist innovative culture and organizational design for fear of loss of control. Ministry will look and feel different and the resulting change in ministry may initially resemble chaos. For many leaders, the rise of ideation, collaboration and creativity that occurs outside of their sphere of influence will be disconcerting. Much of the training of professional clergy will have to be un-learned, and many new skills, tools and ways of thinking will need to be changed.

Change is hard. Love of our neighbor and the desire to follow Jesus ask us to bear the cost of change. In many ways, the recent decades of decline perhaps serve to help leaders realize the pain of not changing will be worse than the cost of making changes. By creating congregational organizations and habits that promote creativity and innovation, a resulting vibrancy of ministry and growing effectiveness of mission will lead to a much more effective and joyful congregation. The new leadership tasks required will be different, but in many ways, easier and more rewarding. Releasing the creativity of the people of the congregation is a faithful, joyful and rewarding response to the opportunities and challenges of our culture and calling to mission.

The church has found itself in new realities many times in its history. It is always good to remember that this is God's church, and that the Spirit is always at work calling and gathering people into the Way of Jesus. The church lives in the world, but is not totally of this world. What it cannot become is so disconnected from

the world that it no longer connects with people. In this connected age, the church can learn some new (and old) ways of being.

CHAPTER TWO: GIFTED AND CALLED FOR MISSION

A church out of step with its culture is in danger of dying. Today, congregations are designed with an organizational and leadership paradigm that no longer reflects the culture around it. Hierarchical and resistant to change, churches find themselves struggling in a culture that is increasingly collaborative, participatory and creative. This chapter will explore some of the theological heritage of Lutheran roots in providing the foundation for a re-formation of congregations.

The early church understood itself to be a community of the sent. The simplest and deepest statement of the mission of the church is found in the words of Jesus, ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ Notably, the community of Jesus followers knew no “clergy” or “church.” There were no bystanders in Jesus’ followers. There was a personal sense of call engendered by the invitation of Jesus. Every person was gifted and sent to live in the Way of Jesus and share the Good News.

Today, the church is “organized,” complete with congregational hierarchy of committees and constitutions. This leads to a de-valuation of the ministry of people. A study conducted by Richard Broholm in 1984 found that “(T)he organizational and liturgical practices of the church continue to reinforce the assumption that there is no valid ministry outside the organizational church.”¹ Not much has changed in the 30 years since.

¹ Richard Broholm, “Toward Claiming and Identifying Our Ministry in the Workplace,” *The Laity in Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World*, eds. George Peck and John S. Hoffman (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984), 150.

Somehow, the church has communicated that some (the clergy, professional staff and appointed leadership) are the actors and the vast majority of the community are on the sidelines of ministry, uninvolved. In other words, as Daniel Wolpert, wrote, “The church had essentially communicated that laypeople weren’t qualified enough to lead in a church setting—either with regard to basic functional decisions or in spiritual matters.”² The result has been a failure on the part of mainline churches to fulfill their central mission as given in Matthew 28 to “go and make disciples of all nations.”

The organizational design of contemporary congregations is not resonant with current culture. In a time where collaboration and creativity are highly sought, structures that limit creativity and collaboration are no longer appropriate and need to be done away with. To begin to imagine new structures and designs for ministry, this work looks into this author’s Lutheran theological heritage to find concepts that might help. The application section will connect these concepts to the work of the dissertation.

Congregations can release their creative power of their people, if they have the desire to do so, and design an organizational structure that promotes and supports this. There are some communities that have taken steps in this direction, and they are distinct. In a work that was important for mission developers (church planters) of my time, Christian Schwartz claimed: “Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry... They invert the pyramid of authority so that the leader assists Christians to attain the spiritual potential God has for them. These pastors equip, support, motivate, and mentor individuals, enabling them to become all that God wants

² Daniel Wolpert, *Leading a Life with God: The Practice of Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2006), 154.

them to be.”³ The leadership task in these kinds of organizations is to release the congregation’s inherent creative and collaborative energy for ministry and mission. “The congregation is the most immediate and crucial part of the ecology that cultivates leaders to do God’s work in the world. The special task of the minister is to be the gardener who tills that ecology.”⁴

Lutheran self-identity is to be a church that is “always reforming.” This should lead to a willingness to look at organizational structures and mindsets. The evidence of the past several decades is that we lack this willingness.⁵ Congregations and their missions do not exist in a constant reality, but are part of a world that is ever changing. A Lutheran colleague, after a study of several innovative congregations says, “Finally, these congregations are fluid, living systems that keep an eye toward the future and maintain an adaptive posture. They continually seek to discover what it means to be church as they live within a changing world.”⁶ Congregations like this exist in our mainline denominations. They remain outliers and not the norm. What do they know that the rest of us need to learn?

³ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2006), 26.

⁴ Craig Van Gelder, *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2009), 101

⁵ Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study finds that “14.7% of U.S. adults are affiliated with the mainline Protestant tradition – a sharp decline from 18.1% when our last Religious Landscape Study was conducted in 2007. Mainline Protestants have declined at a faster rate than any other major Christian group, including Catholics and evangelical Protestants, and as a result also are shrinking as a share of all Protestants and Christians.” <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/>

⁶ Van Gelder, 192.

One place to look is in Lutheran heritage. Like rummaging around the museum for clues as to how to navigate the future, heritage holds treasures to be rediscovered. By doing so, the Spirit, who leads every generation to its own reformation, will be found. Norma Cook Everist makes this point: “Those who have been called to faith in Jesus Christ have been faithfully ministering in the world in each generation...In that regard we have a transformation waiting to happen, an unfinished reformation and a community poised for mission.”⁷ She is correct, although I suggest that it is not an unfinished reformation, but a re-mediated reformation, using new media and harnessing the innovation and creativity it has spawned.

Baptism

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America defines the Church as “a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God’s creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world.”⁸ Lutheran theology affirms that the Church is a *people* empowered by the Spirit given at baptism. Over the years, I have presided at the baptisms thousands of individuals, and these words from our book of worship have been announced: “We welcome you into the body of Christ and *into the mission we share*: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.”⁹ At this point, a new person is welcomed into the

⁷ Norma Cook Everist, “The Church’s Vocation in Society Through the Ministry of the Laity in the Languages of Their Daily Lives,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 2 (June 2011): 154.

⁸ Introduction to The Statement of Purpose of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions.

⁹ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 212.

community as he/she adopts a new identity as a beloved child of God sent to join the congregation and Jesus in mission.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is declared, as was promised by Peter in the Pentecost sermon: "...baptized in Jesus' name...and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰ The person is then forever yoked to the Spirit and both equipped and invited to join in its work. Martin Marty, the preeminent Lutheran Historian and theologian wrote a helpful manual for the parents of baptized children and summarized it this way: "So the first gift of the Spirit in baptism is the awareness that the Spirit is at work right now, the promised gift is being given now, in this baptismal moment and in (daily) life..."¹¹

Baptism gives people identity as beloved children of God. Each individual has a set of gifts, abilities and passion; a "unique design." This is, of course directly illustrated in Scripture, and called out by many, including Martin Luther. "So we are many members of one Christian congregation, but not all of us have the same work...we should live together in simple obedience, in a harmony of many missions and manifold works."¹² The Lutheran understanding of baptism and its formational place in our individual and corporate identity continues to be re-stated through the ages. "A basic definition of missional leadership has been developed based on this rationale, and it includes persons who understand their calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, see themselves as equipped by God with certain gifts to be shared with the larger body of Christ, and believe that they are empowered by the Spirit to engage the world by participating in the creative and

¹⁰ Acts 2:38.

¹¹ Martin E. Marty, *Baptism: A User's Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2008), Loc. 449, Kindle.

¹² *WA 10*, 1, 310–311 (*Kirchenpostille*, 1522).

redemptive mission of God.”¹³ This basic Lutheran impulse is generally interpreted by the culture that surrounds it. It may be that we are at such a pivotal moment of cultural change that this fundamental claim at the heart of Lutheran theology needs to be re-animated to fit the emerging worldview of participation, innovation and collaboration.

Most all adaptation is enabled by a return or a shifting of identity. It is matched by organizational design, as form follows function. If the church re-imagines what it means to claim our identity as beloved children of God sent into a mission of love and redemption, it will find new life.

The Priesthood of All Believers

One of the most profound outcomes of the Reformation, and of Luther’s theological insight in particular, was the lifting up of ordinary people in the work of God. The “Priesthood of all Believers” led to a revolution. This doctrine claims that every member, even those non-members on the periphery, have a place in the work and mission of the congregation. Every person has gifts to bring, roles to serve and a contribution to make. Robert Benne, Professor Emeritus of Roanoke College, makes this point in his important work *Ordinary Saints*: “The work of ordinary saints becomes transparent to the work of God to re-create and maintain his world... It is (this) aspect of work that the Reformers saw as part of the ‘priesthood hood of all believers,’ wherein each Christian mediates the love of God to others.”¹⁴

¹³ Van Gelder, 178.

¹⁴ Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), Loc. 2134, Kindle.

In many ways, this cornerstone of the Reformation, and of Lutheranism in particular, has functionally not been acted upon for generations. Perhaps previous generations thought that they had followed the implications of this doctrine in their congregational design, but it no longer seems present. Surprisingly, the priesthood of all believers seems to be a doctrine made for the emerging generations raised in the era of social media and the sense of collaboration that it has brought with it. Millennials have been raised believing that they each have a voice to share with the world, and the power of creative platforms with which to express themselves in all manner of ways.

Unfortunately, congregations and denominations are still structured with a hierarchy implied and lived out. This is a challenge to the viability of our congregations and denominations. It raises the question: “How do congregations organize so that every person can live out their part in God’s work in the world?”

As the main culture becomes more experiential, more collaborative and participatory, it will serve churches well to draw upon the concept of the priesthood of all believers. Craig Van Gelder, a contemporary Lutheran theologian, writes: “Although it will take until the fulfillment of the reign of God for the church to fully embody this reality, everyone gets a voice in God’s economy. This is not simply based on humanistic egalitarianism. *Rather, it is grounded in the nature of the Spirit to work in and use anyone and everyone for God’s mission in the world.*”¹⁵ This theological insight encourages the view that all people in a congregation are collaborators, creators and participants in ministry.

¹⁵ Van Gelder, 156.

The Ongoing Creative Work of God

At the source of human creativity is the creativity of God. As the combined work of imagination, knowledge and experience, having creativity is an aspect of being created in the image of God. As people of faith, Christians affirm that God's creative work is ongoing. Humanity's ability to create, work and participate in the work of God is a product of the ongoing creative work of God. "Sometimes life in vocation appears as subjection to a predetermined and fixed reality; but at other times man, through faith and love, bursts through the external and stands free and re-creative over against the given. Certainly just this almost lighthearted feature in Luther's ethics lies behind his belief in God as he who is ever creating anew."¹⁶ These words, from the well-known Swedish theologian, Gustaf Wingren, reflects on God's creativity, and the work of God's Spirit in and through people. The Spirit has both endowed humanity with the gift of creativity, and invited people into a co-creative role with God in the world.

Creativity as expressed in vocation is one way to participate in the ongoing creative work of God: "Vocation and the man who fulfills it are used as tools and means for God's continuing creation, which occurs 'out of nothing,' i.e. under vocation's cross."¹⁷ Creativity has two different objects; the act of creative expression gives joy to God and our neighbor. As people participate in the ongoing creative work of God, creativity is directed toward the needs and wellbeing of our neighbor. It is a fulfillment of the great commandment, and a working out of God's love for the world: "Man's co-

¹⁶ Gustaf Wingren and Carl C. Rasmussen, *Luther on Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), xii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

operation with God is not directed towards God, but outward, toward his neighbor. Man's action is a medium for God's love to others."¹⁸

This sense of the ongoing creative work of God flowing through us to the neighbor suggests a kind of ease to life—purpose leading to fulfillment—all facilitated by creativity. A life lived in this way is gracefully lived. Wingren offers this beautiful interpretation of Martin Luther's understanding of "office": "Luther's idea of office constitutes an important element in his rich concept of creation, which is peculiarly concrete and vital. The birds, which sing even though they do not know what they are to eat, are an example for us. God pours out his gifts, seeds, herbs, and edible creatures. Our only care ought to be what we should do with all the good that God has made, so that it may benefit our neighbor."¹⁹ These words suggest that joy is found in the embrace of vocation and the gifts that God has given, including creativity. This gives life meaning, and implies a certain grace and ease.

For Luther, vocation is an invitation to join in God's redemptive work. To embrace one's vocation is to accept the gifts given by a creative God. To deploy those gifts are an act of co-creation with God, and the objects of vocation are neighbors, God's children. There is a beauty to this rich theological heritage. The form of congregational life should match theological constructs, especially ones that are beautiful.

A Reforming Movement

¹⁸ Ibid., 180.

¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

As stated before, Lutheran identity is as a “reforming movement of the Church catholic.” However, Lutherans’ habits sometimes betray us. Perhaps it is time to bring it once again to bear on the church. Wingren again provides just the right emphasis: “The power of Lutheran theology, with its emphasis upon the unmerited grace and love of God in Christ, and its humble acceptance of the limitations of all human effort both rational and behavioral, *does reformulate itself as it addresses every new and present form of bondage that humanity encounters.* (Italics added) The freedom of the gospel calls for nothing less.”²⁰

Sometimes the “bondage that humanity encounters” is the church itself. Today, the way in which congregations are envisioned, organized and experienced does not invite collaboration or creativity. The cultural context of the church has changed, especially here in America, moving from static, hierarchical organizations to lean, participatory ones. However, the culture congregations have perpetuated for themselves has remained stagnant. Here, the self-understanding of “always reforming” is helpful. A current commentator mentions the need for context: “In effect, of course, this is the ‘church always reforming and being reformed.’ Theology, if it is to be relevant and useful, must address particular needs in particular times and places. Context is unavoidable.”²¹ Particular needs in particular times change. And, change is, of course, difficult, especially in organizations as steeped in tradition and custom as the church. Perhaps, though, this truth is accepted a bit too easily. It is fascinating to reach back to

²⁰ Ernest L. Simmons, “Theology in the Life of the Lutheran Church,” *Dialog* 50, no. 2 (2011): 114–19. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6385.2011.00595.x. Emphasis mine.

²¹ *Ibid.*, x.

Luther's own writings to hear him call change an act of love: "Love 'overcomes all circumstances,' as Luther says ceaselessly... With clear eye it also sees immediately when, for the neighbor's sake, old practices must give way to something new. And in love God is active with his Spirit, the same God who established social orders... The task of the church includes a continuing renewal..."²²

Rarely is organizational design critiqued using love as an argument for change and adaptation, but there it is. For a church in need of change, perhaps love is exactly the argument it needs to accept fundamental, organizational change. Again, Wingren says it well: "Where there is love, there is no legal rigidity. Love's action may proceed in keeping with usual practice or against it. It acts according to a principle which cannot be construed in advance, but which makes its decision afresh in the light of the need of the neighbor..."²³ Out of love, the church can risk asking, as Gary Simpson, a contemporary Lutheran missiologist does: "How can we organize ourselves to best serve the neighbors we have here and now?" Apparently, the Reformers were asking this very question: "In the reformers vocational imagination, all the world is filled with neighbors and their neighborhoods, and God puts us in this world precisely for them... Wherever the evangelical emancipation of vocation with its liberation of the laity has emerged forthrightly, a 'new radical reevaluation of ordinary life' takes place, the vocation of 'ordinary saints' comes to the foreground, and a leveling in the church arises."²⁴ The traditional Lutheran self-understanding as a church always reforming is a reminder that

²² Wingren and Rasmussen, 47.

²³ Ibid., 49–50.

²⁴ Gary M. Simpson, *Dialog* 54, no. 2 (2015): 135–50, doi:10.1111/dial.12169.

we should be self-critical, good at analyzing our culture and quick to re-form ourselves to love, serve and reach our neighbors in each new time and place.

Vocation and the Neighbor

The central claim of this dissertation is that congregations will find greater life and vitality if they can release the creative power of the people of God. The greatest theological support for the resulting shift is Luther's understanding of vocation:

To use a rough example: If you are a craftsman, you will find the Bible placed in your workshop, in your hands, in your heart; it teaches and preaches how you ought to treat your neighbor. Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them. You will not be able to look anywhere where it does not strike your eyes. None of the things with which you deal daily are too trifling to tell you this incessantly, if you are but willing to hear it; and there is no lack of such preaching, for you have as many preachers as there are transactions, commodities, tools, and other implements in your house and estate; and they shout this to your face, "My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his."²⁵

Martin Luther said that vocation is understand to be a part of every person's life passionately and well. Luther also claimed that every individual is uniquely shaped for this work. "Vocation means that those who are closest at hand, family and fellow-workers, are given by God: it is one's neighbor whom one is to love...Each of the social factors arising through the vocational actions of different people has its own character; and the life of society in this way develops in rich variety."²⁶ The implication here is that congregations are not filled with consumers, by-standers or less-thans. Every person is uniquely called and gifted to serve the neighbor and to join the community of faith in its

²⁵ *WA* 32,495–496 (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 1532).

²⁶ Wingren and Rasmussen, 172.

participation in the work of God. This means that there is a vast, mostly un-tapped reservoir of creative capacity for mission in each congregation.

Supporting this is the powerful experience a person has when she is called and equipped by the local congregation to create and participate in mission and ministry. Again in the words of Luther, “It is most true that when one is persuaded about one’s vocation that God wills it, and that by his Word he has commanded what one is doing, then one feels such power and drive in that divine mandate as one will find in the speech of no orator, be it a Demosthenes or a Cicero.”²⁷

In the current US-American culture, the primacy of the individual to affect change, communicate an idea or to contribute a work has risen to new heights. At the same time, congregations have not invited individuals to participate the same way within the congregation. The personal nature of vocation is missed. A Lutheran contemporary states it this way: “God calls . . . me. It is not selfish or self-centered to affirm the profoundly personal dimension of vocation. . . . To speak of the God who calls without at the same time attending to the person who hears this call is to distort the divine-human dialogue. It misses something central to vocation.”²⁸ In short, our greatest creative assets are parked on the seats and pews of the churches. We have not led them from the baptismal font to their vocations; it is a wasted opportunity for parishioners and a missed opportunity for their neighbors. Mark Tranvik summarizes Luther’s thoughts on vocation and the neighbor: “God does not need your good works. God is doing fine without them.

²⁷ *WA* 30, 149 (*The Large Catechism*, 1529).

²⁸ Mark D. Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), Loc. 851, Kindle.

But take a look around—your neighbor needs them. Indeed, the baptized one is raised to new life—a new life that takes place in God’s good creation. He or she is returned to God’s world to love and serve the neighbor.”²⁹ It is time to re-capture the idea of vocation and to re-imagine how we can make it come alive for the sake of our people, our congregations and our neighbors.

Christian Freedom: Freedom From and Freedom For

One of the most important concepts of the Reformation was the idea of Christian freedom. In claiming that everyone was set free by grace, the Reformation changed everything. Freedom *from* begs the question “freedom *for* what end?” The question has still not been fully addressed.

These Reformation breakthroughs provided radical new possibilities for all people to serve in the church and to make significant vocational contributions to society. There was a break from reliance on authority in a person’s determining what to think and what to do in the world. People were able to read the Scriptures for themselves. But what more needs to happen? Freedom *from* is freedom *for*. It is the ‘freedom for’ that is left not fully realized. The power of the priesthood of all believers has, even these many years later, not fully been unleashed. Why?³⁰

Perhaps the church always gravitates toward control. Perhaps it is that society has inherited an organizational structure from a culture that was informed by the Industrial Age, created hierarchical systems and thinking. Clearly, the way in which denominations and congregations are structured has not yet fully embraced the idea of Christian freedom. In allowing more collaboration, freedom, and creativity, the church might find a

²⁹ Ibid., Loc. 965.

³⁰ Norma Cook, Everist, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 2 (June 2011): 154–61.

flourishing of mission and ministry. Jurgen Moltmann makes this point when he calls the church “a congregation of the liberated”: “In this sense—and only in this sense—the church is already an end in itself, not as *church* complete with hierarchy and bureaucracy but as the *congregation of the liberated*...In the remembered and hoped-for liberty of Christ the church serves the liberation of men by demonstrating human freedom in its own life and by manifesting its *rejoicing in that freedom*.”³¹

The real power of embracing vocation, the priesthood of all believers and Christian freedom, is not simply in the liberation of structures, but also in the joy that individuals will find. William Placher suggested just this kind of experience when he said: “What excitement to find that there is some right answer for what to do with my life, some place in the puzzle where my piece fits snugly and exactly! The Book of Common Prayer speaks of that God ‘whose service is perfect freedom.’ When we find the match between our joy and the world’s need, the place God wants us to be, it does feel more like liberation than imprisonment.”³² In these words, there is much hope for the church in the midst of the creative, collaborative and experiential culture of today. To encourage people to find their place in the broader mission of a congregation is not simply to release their creativity, but also to increase their joy.

In baptism, individuals find their identity and are joined to a community and the work of Jesus in this world. Baptism gifts the Spirit, and reinforces each individual’s unique design. Gifted and sent into community and mission, each individual finds his/her

³¹ Jurgen Moltmann, Robert E. Neale, Sam Keen, and David LeRoy Miller, *Theology of Play* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1972), 71–72.

³² William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 10.

place in the priesthood of all believers and finds a unique place in the ministry of the congregation. In the claiming of her/his vocation, each person discovers the joy and significance of a life lived in service to neighbor and participates in the ongoing creative work of God. The Reformation provides an understanding of continual re-formation, and allows for a rethinking and re-engineering of congregational design to tap into the true potential of the priesthood of all believers. The culture has moved into a participatory, experiential, and collaborative way of life, rewarding innovation and creativity. It is time to tap into theological heritage and design congregations to respond to this cultural shift. Lutherans have the theology to do so. It is time to trust the Spirit and our heritage and seize this opportunity to engage people more fully in the mission to which we are called.

Conclusion: Releasing the Creativity of the People of God

The Lutheran theology and traditions explored above leads to the imagination of new designs for congregational organization and new tools to discover the giftedness and vocational call of people. Beyond issues of organizational design, this will require innovative leadership. It will require new relationships between the individual, the congregation and its leaders. The vision of the congregation will need to flow up the organization as well as down through the organization. If people are to be providers of content, designers of ministry and collaborators, things will have to change. Van Gelder wrote:

Woven into this leadership dance is the paradox that people, who are both saints and sinners, boldly assert themselves as God's people leading within their congregation and the world. They do so within a culture that allows imperfection and that practices forgiveness. In the end, leadership

sets the communal tone, articulates the mission and vision, and creates an atmosphere that sets people free to lead and serve.³³

Change, of course is not easy. Even with a rich Lutheran theological heritage of reforming, vocation and freedom. Structures can be hard to change, but perhaps the most difficult change will be with the mindset and habits of those currently in leadership. The leadership will need to be less about producing ministry and more about creating environments and empowering teams, groups and individuals. There will be less “professionalizing” of ministry. There will be less control and more organic raising up of ministry based on the passions of the people present and the needs of the community around the congregation. A new definition of “membership” will be necessary and will call forth a new definition of participation. Those on the margins of the congregation can become tremendously important to the mission of the congregation, but need to be valued and their contributions welcomed. The secret to all of this is that by creating these new systems, there is joy and life to be found. Schwartz, in his work noted that: “...an interesting corollary result of our research was the discovery that probably no factor influences the contentedness of Christians more than whether they are utilizing their gifts or not...”³⁴

When this is done right, there is an energy and vitality within the congregation that leads to a sense of deep fulfillment that comes when people have joined in the work of God in a deep, deep way. Lutheran Terry Elton shares, “The congregations I studied operate as complex, open systems made up of robust networks with shared leadership,

³³ Van Gelder, 190.

³⁴ Schwarz, 24.

and they have an active, missional view of God as the source of their life together. They find the energy for their life together in the work of the Spirit and in the people themselves.”³⁵ Elton demonstrates that congregations can be organized in new ways. In this dissertation, one will see how a congregation can be structured and its self-identity changed, as well as how it can act on these theological insights to release the creative power of its people in mission.

³⁵ Van Gelder, 204.

CHAPTER THREE:
THE CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION AND THE NEW DAY OF INNOVATION
AND COLLABORATION

An exciting new day is dawning. It is the emergence of a participatory culture. Its advent brings with it new realities that shape the way people innovate, collaborate and design. People can now organize in ways that only years ago would have been impossible. They are connecting, innovating, collaborating and designing in order to participate in and change the world around them. The church stands to gain from these new realities, if it can see these changes for what they are and respond to them with new awareness and match a changing culture with innovation.

Fundamental and long held aspects of our life together (structure, self-understanding and identity) will have to adapt to this new day. The change that this brings is monumental, and the pace of this change is faster than we have realized. It is here to stay. It is truly a new day.

One of the early thought-leaders of the advent of the Web and mobile communications, Charles Leadbeater, was an early voice proclaiming the wide-ranging effects of the cultural change that was coming:

Mobile communications and pervasive computing technologies, together with social contracts that were never possible before, are already beginning to change the way people meet, mate, work, fight, buy sell, govern, and create...Large numbers of small groups, using the new media to their individual benefit, will create emergent effects that will nourish some existing institutions and ways of life and dissolve others.¹

¹ Charles Leadbeater, *We-Think* (London, UK: Profile, 2008), xiii.

There is almost no aspect of our common life that stands to remain the same as this new day is dawning. How we gather information, how we present ourselves to the world, how people share their work, how we shop and how we find entertainment are all rapidly changing. It may be that out of all the institutions in our culture today, it is the church that is among the last to gain an understanding of these changes and acquire the mindset and tools necessary to be relevant in this new reality. People and culture are changing as the world is now experienced and mediated in vastly different ways. The concepts of innovation, collaboration and design are important in this cultural shift, and they are important concepts for the church to master.

People are becoming more immersed in a creative, collaborative and connected environment. The new tools of pervasive computing, smart phones, intimate technology, and social media enable them. Their identity, sense of community and ability to connect and participate in the world is changing rapidly. Generationally, it is easy to see that our children are growing up in a vastly different, more connected world. This offers them access, information and power in ways we could not dream of when we were children. Our children would not recognize certain aspects of the world that we grew up in, and would find the limits of the media we used surprising.

As an institution, congregations are suffering. They are not on the leading edge of this new technologically-powered media. Our congregations are built on the organizational models, self-understandings and media of ages past. Without rapid change, we face an uncertain future. As people enter this new day and take residence in its realities, our congregations risk becoming outdated, limited and irrelevant as if we are still living in a previous age.

On the other hand, if the church can immerse itself in the tools of this new day, it can find its place once again in the world. It can take its turn in bringing the Way of Jesus into a new culture, to a new land, to a new people. New structures, both virtual and real, will have to emerge. New self-understandings will develop. We can match this new day with a new church built on ancient foundations. This is a daunting challenge and an exciting opportunity.

The New Day of Innovation

The shifts from old media to new media, from a balkanized world to a connected world, have happened in a historical blink of an eye. Innovation is pervasive, and every aspect of our culture is undergoing vast change. Some parts of our culture are thriving in this new reality (the corporate creations of Silicon Valley as an example – Facebook, Twitter, Spotify, Instagram, etc.), and other parts of our culture are struggling to survive (such as big box retail and the quintessential American shopping mall). Will the church adapt and thrive or be left behind?

At the root of this change is the increasing speed of innovation. As a concrete way to gauge for oneself the pace and significance of innovation, try this small experiment. Just hold your smart phone and imagine the landline phone (and camera, encyclopedia, newspaper, and mail service) that it replaced. Landline phones of one's youth could link to one other person, one other home. Now, we can connect with anyone in any part of the world, and Facetime the whole exchange. The amount of information one can find through his/her smart phone exceeds the contents of any library. The numbers of connections one can make through his/her smart phone is easily greater the sum total of the number of people one's grandparents knew in the course of their lifetime. Pace and

scale of innovation has grown exponentially. This rapid change was created by innovative minds and organization. What has fueled such innovation, and what can the church learn from those who have led the innovation?

Innovation is not what we have commonly assumed. Innovation is not fueled solely by brilliant individuals, but is a collaborative effort over time. Innovation is built on platforms² of ideas linked one to another, from different contributors and different contexts. What is radically different with innovation today as opposed to any time in the past is that collaboration can happen across continents, languages, and disciplines. People can find like-minded people with aligned interests to collaborate anywhere in the world. The ability to prototype ideas and rapidly create iterations is now done at light speed. The power of computers, communication systems, lean organizations and the effect of globalization has enhanced innovation in countless ways.

Innovation is not captive to the for-profit world. It is not a product of a certain industry or culture. Innovation cuts across nations, economies and cultures. Innovative systems, organizations and institutions have certain universal characteristics are transferrable. Here are eight characteristics of innovative systems, each transferrable to any organization:

1. *Patience and perseverance.* Innovation emerges over time. The study of innovation demonstrates the myth of the brilliant individual and highlights the reality of steady improvement of ideas leading to break-through innovation.³

² Steven Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2010).

³ R. Keith Sawyer, *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2007), 9.

What seems to be emerging spontaneously as new innovation actually has a history of rapid iterations, collaboration, and experimentation. Often times, what emerges is not the “thing” that was first envisioned, but something vastly different. Something that found a utility discovered only over time and collaboration. The church’s difficulty with this is that it lacks the aspiration to innovate. It is often in preservation mode, and leans to the past rather than leaning into the future. The church does not often reward experimentation, or see failure as a necessary part of learning. Often limited by resources, risk taking is not rewarded. Hence, no real patience for innovation.

2. *An environment of idea-sharing and careful listening.* Most innovation happens through conversation and community, not in the laboratory.⁴ This environment is fostered with a sense of community, common purpose and trust. It is an environment that needs careful design and nurture. It is emergent in nature, but it must be supported, listened to and valued. Congregations are always balancing tradition with the pull of change. For many, retention of the past is a much more significant pull than listening to new needs, understanding the stories of new people, or engagement with changing neighborhoods. To the point of this work, the church has had a hard time engaging with the emerging culture of participation and the digital natives it is creating.
3. *A willingness to build on the ideas of a network of collaborators.* This requires mutuality, trust and openness, and a pre-supposed liquid network that is open

⁴ Johnson, 61.

and accessible to those interested in contributing, collaborating and creating new ideas. Diversity of perspectives, experiences, and opinions are necessary to gain maximum advantage from collaboration. A clergy-dependent, hierarchical organization like the contemporary American church has a hard time practicing collaboration and valuing a diversity of opinions in the midst of a tradition of not only orthodox theology, but an imagined orthodox practice of the faith.

4. *An ability to learn from testing.* Innovation is spawned from trial and error, heavy on the error.⁵ Errors, as Johnson points out, often create a path that lead out of a static place and forces an organization to explore possibilities in new ways.⁶ Of all of the characteristics of innovative organizations, leaders and cultures, this is the one least embraced by the church.
5. *The need to be problem-creators, not just problem-solvers.* The most innovative organizations and teams are not successful by only solving problems. Through multiple points of view, diversity of skill and experience, openness and dialog, collaborative innovation results in defining new questions, problems and opportunities that may be very different from the problem that began the collaboration. Churches discourage disruptive thinking, people and particularly leaders. Many of my colleagues have lost sleep, their confidence and their love for ministry because they learned that church culture does not often promote disruption as a strategy.

⁵ Sawyer, 16.

⁶ Johnson, 137.

6. *A tolerance for the inefficiency of innovation.* The only way to produce good ideas is to sort through a lot of bad ideas, which means the sorting out of good ideas needs to be done well, failures need to be celebrated, and effective autopsies presented for learning.⁷ Again, often an alien thought for a church that likes to portray perfection, order and tradition.
7. *Allowing ideas from all corners of the organization.* Idea-creation and innovation is led primarily from the bottom-up. Leaders facilitate the innovation of all participants. Outside points of view are invited and encouraged. There is a huge value being demonstrated in the for-profit world with the engagement of consumers and suppliers in the process of innovation. Even small congregations in the Lutheran tradition are not flat organizations and lack habits that promote input from all parts of the community.
8. *An acknowledgement that networks are smarter than individuals.* Networks of people allow ideas to build on one another, complete on another, and prove one another. Innovative systems and organization promote networking and building relationships beyond the boundaries of the organization itself and robust networks across job responsibilities within the organization. Here, there are signs of hope as there are individuals and congregations in my church tribe who are beginning to network in significant ways. They are outliers, but it is a beginning.

A discussion of how the church (at least my tribe, but I believe true of all mainline denominations) scores as an innovative organization would inevitably come to

⁷ Sawyer, 55.

the conclusion that we do not embrace a culture of innovation. There are individuals and congregations that are well on the way to embracing a culture of innovation within the Lutheran church, but they are few.

An Example of Innovation

In December 2004, *Fast Company* magazine went searching for the most innovative company in America and they found W.L. Gore and Associates, maker of the famous GORE-TEX waterproof material. Most people do not know that Gore has created more than a thousand products, from Elixir—the top-selling acoustic guitar string—to Glide dental floss, and even medical products such as heart patches and synthetic blood vessels. Bill Gore, the founder, created the company with hardly any hierarchy, few ranks and titles, and a minimum of structure, aside from such necessary support functions as human resources and IT. He organized the company into small task forces that constantly self-organize and re-group in response to changing needs. Every employee is given 10 percent of their time to pursue speculative new ideas (similar to 3M and Google).⁸ W. A. Gore is a prime example of an innovative organization, and this model is being replicated by profit and non-profit organizations seeking to maximize innovation.

The Role of Improvisation

One characteristic common to innovative organizations is improvisation. Innovative organizations create a balance between planning and spontaneous reaction to

⁸ Ibid., 18.

changing context. There is a trust between partners and collaborators, and a mixing of appropriate and complimentary gifts within groups and teams. Innovative organizations are often compared to well-trained athletic teams, improvisational comedy troops, or, more commonly, jazz musicians.⁹ These comparisons provide metaphors by which to understand that innovative organizations are fundamentally improvisational in nature. They capitalize on opportunities, think creatively and reward experimentation, rapid iterations, and evaluations, and deploy resources to successful ideas. That is a rare experience within the church. The church is risk-adverse, slow to embrace change, penalizes “failed” experiments and frowns upon improvisational culture.

Planning and Emergent Behavior

Also necessary for innovation to thrive in an organization is the creation of a delicate balance between planning and emergent behavior. Organizations that are more controlling are much less innovative over time. Those who find value in maintaining flexibility, reactivity and improvisation are rewarded. The mantra for innovative organizations is “Design a little, implement a lot.”¹⁰ This flies in the face of conventional wisdom about planning:

Most of us tend to believe that planning in advance makes groups more effective and that centralized control is especially important in a disaster. But studies repeatedly show the importance of...emergent groups... Innovation emerges from the bottom up, unpredictably and improvisationally, and it’s often only after the innovation has occurred that everyone realizes what’s happened. The paradox is that

⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰ Etienne Wenger, Richard A. McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 190.

innovation can't be planned, it can't be predicted; it has to be allowed to emerge.¹¹

The art of designing for innovation is to have just enough structure to support it, but not so heavy of a structure that it suffocates it.

The new day of innovation is already upon us. Organizations that join innovation with the tools of social media and the spirit of collaboration will see a future unfold that is ripe with possibilities and growth. Organizations and institutions that fail to innovate in a time of increasingly rapid change will be left in the past. The implications for the church are obvious. Will the church commit itself to becoming an innovative organization? Can the church step away from an embrace of long-term, risk-adverse planning and adopt an improvisational, emergent approach necessary to build a culture of innovation? Not only is this important with regard to effectiveness as a change strategy, but it will also increasingly be a matter of recruitment: who wants to give their time, energy and skills to an organization that does not understand innovation?

Social Media as a Means of Collaboration

Accompanying the new day of innovation is also the rise of social media. Two interconnected phenomenon, or perhaps two aspects of the same phenomenon, innovation and social media are driving cultural change. The new day of social media has been upon us for only a few short years, but its effect has been overwhelming. This is due to its nature as a networking phenomenon. In many ways, it is a force multiplier for innovation and explains the rapidity of the innovation of our day. Social media has had a seemingly disproportionate effect on our culture and that is due to a simple law of numbers.

¹¹ Ibid., 23–5.

Moore's Law states that computer chips get cheaper as they grow more powerful.¹² Metcalfe's Law¹³ states that the useful power of a network multiplies rapidly as the numbers of nodes in the network increases. Reed's Law¹⁴ states that the power of a network, especially one that enhances social networks, multiplies even more rapidly as the number of different human groups that can use the network increases. Moore's Law was the reality behind the fast growth of the PC industry, Metcalfe's Law drove the deployment of the Internet, and Reed's Law is now driving the growth of the mobile and pervasive net.¹⁵ The math is undeniable: as smart phones and other mobile devices increase, the net takes root everywhere. Not only is there a rise in individual-to-individual contact, but there is group-to-group contact, with content being produced and shared at all levels of the network and sent in all directions, all happening at once. The advent of social media has exploded like a super-nova. The networking effect is obvious; resulting in an explosion of collaboration.

Like all new media, current and future social media will inevitably do four things: extend the reach of individuals and groups; amplify their voices; make old media

¹² "In 1965, Gordon Moore made a prediction that would set the pace for our modern digital revolution. From careful observation of an emerging trend, Moore extrapolated that computing would dramatically increase in power, and decrease in relative cost." "50 Years of Moore's Law," Intel, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.intel.com/content/www/us/en/silicon-innovations/moores-law-technology.html>.

¹³ Metcalfe's law states that the "Total value of a network to its users grows as the square of the total number of its users. Thus, the ratio of value to cost of adding one more network user grows disproportionately as the network grows larger." "What Is Metcalfe's Law? Definition and Meaning," BusinessDictionary.com, accessed September 7, 2017. <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/Metcalfe-s-Law.html>.

¹⁴ "The value of a network increases dramatically when people form subgroups for collaboration and sharing," coined by computer scientist David P. Reed "Encyclopedia," Reed's Law Definition from PC Magazine Encyclopedia, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/64217/reed-s-law>.

¹⁵ Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Perseus, 2002), xv.

irrelevant or obsolete; and address the concerns of past media, but in vastly different ways. This will produce unexpected consequences. We are in the midst of experiencing these effects. As the social media explosion extends reach and amplifies voices, we see people connect and organize all around the world. As Clay Shirky noted, “We live, for the first time in human history, in a world where being part of a globally interconnected group is the normal case for most citizens.”¹⁶

We see old, one-way media like television outpaced by consumer-produced media (By the end of 2009, YouTube saw an average of twenty-four hours of video uploaded *every minute*, while Twitter receives close to three hundred *million* words a day).¹⁷ The prime concerns of old media, like news, are being met now by amateurs, blogs and independent news sources. The most recent (2016) American presidential election reflects both the good and the bad of this rise. Information no longer comes from a few recognized voices, but rather from all manner of sources.

The central concerns of media—entertainment, news, self-expression, and connection—are still operative, but the responses of the new media have now become multi-dimensional. The lines between the producers, contributors and audience have now become blurred and have no distinction. Every individual has the potential to be both producer and consumer of content. Connections between people are fluid, easily established, and linked with multiple communities (real and virtual) all around the world. Social media, in this new day, serves many of the same purposes as old media, but the

¹⁶ Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2010).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93. (website Hosting Facts stated at the end of 2016, there are 3.26 billion web users, 40% of the world’s population, with the US at 85% of population using the web. \$2.2 Trillion worth of sales in 2016, 1.55 Billion users on Facebook and 2.9 Billion searches on Google daily).

tools are much more effective and multi-directional. The central concerns of media are now met in much richer, more varied and powerful ways.

Social theorists have long held that tools define a society, so it is important to ask how these new tools shape the US culture. The tools of the new day of social media are powerful and pervasive, affecting sense of identity, community and power as they re-mediate the world.

The church offers an interpretation of the world and a narrative of meaning and identity. As the culture experiences the world through social media, the church needs to explore the implications that this has for meaning-making and the experience of being in this world. If the church is not literate in the new media, one wonders how it will tell “the old, old story” to a new generation who are native to the new tools of social media.

The New Day of Collaboration

According to Charles Leadbeater, “You are what you share” is the mantra of the new day of collaboration.¹⁸ The tools of social media are being used to share and combine ideas. In this new day of collaboration, you are what you share, who you are connected to, which networks you belong to and which ideas, videos, links and comments you tweet, share, publish or blog. This is made possible because of the amazingly low financial and opportunity cost to organize groups. No longer are there barriers to limit collective self-expression and organization. People are free to share ideas in amazing new ways. They are free to belong to groups of shared affinity and identity. They can collaborate with anyone, from anywhere.

¹⁸ Leadbeater, xi.

Imagine a garden and a gardener. One gardener can work alone in a garden. A community garden allows a gardener to collaborate with many gardeners, and is a larger enterprise. If you put together a cooperative network of gardening, it becomes even a bigger scale. So it is with social media. The gardener is a producer of content. The idea-gardens of past media were limited in size and scale, but this is no longer true. Social media is a tool that develops huge co-operative community gardens of ideas that build on one another, multiply and breed in interesting ways (think of Wiki products, open source software, and digital commons). Again, Leadbeater claims:

People want meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute, to add their piece of information, view or opinion. They want viable ways to share, to think and work laterally with their peers. They are searching for collaborative ways to get things done. When these three come together—participate, share, collaborate—they create new ways to organize ourselves that are more transparent, cheaper and less top down... We will look back on the coming decade as a period of unparalleled social creativity when we sought to devise new ways of working together to be more democratic, creative and innovative, potentially on a vast scale.¹⁹

The new day of collaboration brings with it an understanding of where knowledge resides. In previous days, thinking was held to be a largely individualistic activity, but in this new day, what matters is the social organization of collaboration: how we share our ideas as we think together. Ideas abound. In June 1993, there were only 130 websites in the world. By mid-2007 there were 135 million registered host names and 61 million active sites.²⁰ Peer-to-Peer working, folk creativity, interest-group and amateur-based niche interests are flourishing as they mix the brand new of the wiki and the blog with the

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

needs, concerns and passions that have always existed. In the arena of work, collaboration allows the free sharing of ideas that come from multiple sources inside and outside of the company and allows a new kind of self-management to flourish. In the area of consumption, it allows consumers to become participants in the design and creation of solutions and elicits from them commitment, effort and ideas. In the area of social action, it allows concerned individuals to develop into impassioned groups that can design and coordinate action and gain voice and power in new ways.

One significant example is in the field of computer gaming, which has become increasingly social and collaborative. Will Wright, the designer for the Sims, a \$1 billion product of Electronic Arts, makes the point that it is most important for game designers to design for effective collaboration and community: “Whichever game attracts the best community will enjoy the most success. What you can do to make the game more successful is not to make the game better but to make the community better.”²¹ This comment on community demonstrates the potential for the church to offer real value to the world—the value of authentic, deep community.

Further example of the primacy of collaboration comes from Jorma Ollila, long-time chairman of Nokia as he reflects on effective work environments built on community: “Innovation and creativity are not individualistic. It’s really about interaction, getting people to interact with one another the right way. Leadership is about creating an atmosphere in which people get a kick from working with one another.”²² Collaborative working environments attract people, and many of our people are now used

²¹ Ibid., 105–6.

²² Ibid., 119.

to highly collaborative working environments that empower them. When presented with congregational structures that limit collaboration or empowerment, they are not interested.

Leadbeater offers another example when he describes the collaboration between the British Library and Microsoft who have come to an agreement to make available a much larger collection of its material in digital form, which will be stored on computers owned by various people and organized by communities of users supported by librarians. As a model for the library of the future, it has become a “platform for participation and collaboration, with users increasingly sharing information among themselves as well as drawing on the library’s resources.”²³ With regard to public institutions:

A public sector that does not create platforms for its citizens to create solutions for themselves, together, will soon start to seem old, outdated and tired. It will also be far less productive and effective in creating public goods. The future of public services rests on their becoming platforms for participation and collaboration, mobilizing citizens as player-developers in creating public good.²⁴

The five principles that serve as the foundation for this new day of collaboration are *core*, *contribute*, *connect*, *collaborate* and *create*. *Core* implies that there are like-minded, passionate people who have found it imperative to share a set of ideas. *Contribute* is the desire for each participant to bring something unique to the conversation. *Connect* is the ability of these people to find one another easily. *Collaborate* is the process of sharing ideas, building upon them, testing, evaluating and following them as they develop and lead to new ideas. *Create* is the ability of the

²³ Ibid. 145.

²⁴ Ibid. 153.

collaborative group to bring something new to the world, and to imagine new problems to address. One can easily imagine that the chief new dynamic contribution to this mix is the advent of the social media and pervasive computing—the ability to connect. The desires to contribute, collaborate and create have always been present, but the tools to connect have made it truly a new day of collaboration.

Linked with theological ideas and self-understandings like vocation and the priesthood of all believers, these five principles could be used to re-shape congregational self-understanding. As a constellation of Communities of Practice, a congregation could have an identifiable core (or several), the ability to encourage and provide platforms for every person to contribute, use old tools and new media to help people connect, design lean processes, like self-directed groups and teams, to promote collaboration and enjoy a whole new season of mission and ministry being created from the bottom up instead of the top down. There is promise in what we can learn from the emerging culture of collaboration.²⁵

The New Day of Cognitive Surplus

²⁵There is a great set of images about how to think about different levels of innovative culture – “The four types of collaboration patterns that emerged were a star, pyramid, amoeba, and fireworks. Star collaboration, for instance, happens in organizations where ideas and decisions are more centralized; they flow through a core person or group before the organization moves forward with them in innovative work. Pyramid collaboration follows a mode where the uppermost organizational members do most of the creative and innovative work and decision-making. A bit less centralized than the star form, it still assumes that creativity and innovation may not be evenly distributed throughout the organization. Amoeba collaboration pushes the expectation and activity of creativity and innovation throughout the organization and may change shape-in terms of who collaborates with whom-over time. Finally, a fireworks form of collaboration occurred where ideas sparked from different parts of the organization, and then groups, teams, or units worked on them and sparked more.” Nancy K. Napier and Mikael Nilsson. *The Creative Discipline: Mastering the Art and Science of Innovation*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008. pg. 33. Kindle Edition.

*The atomization of social life in the twentieth century left us so far removed from participatory culture that when it came back, we needed the phrase “participatory culture” to describe it.*²⁶

Cognitive Surplus is a concept coined by Clay Shirky, teacher at the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University. It refers to the available free time of the developed world. As people move into a more participatory and collaborative culture, there is a re-allocation of how people spend their free time. Increasingly, people are moving from a “sit down and be entertained” culture to a “connect, collaborate and create” culture, which releases the cognitive surplus of a huge population. That surplus, over a trillion hours of free time each year,²⁷ is starting to be used in social movements, for social good, and in various compassionate, collaborative endeavors. Two critical changes have ushered in the new day of cognitive surplus: the aforementioned buildup of free time in the developed world and the pervasive spread of social media.

Social media, and the connectivity that it brings, marries personal motivations like self-direction and competency with social motivations of belonging and making the world better. Then it utilizes the newly-available arsenal of tools to allow individuals and small groups to make oversized impacts in the world. Wiki, charity, social capital, and group-health²⁸ sites, websites such as Netsquared.org, Dealis.org, Care2.com, Kiva.org, and BeExtra.org are all examples of networked groups out to enable individuals to express, give and organize support to causes that matter to them. The rise of these groups

²⁶ Shirky, 19.

²⁷ Ibid., 27.

²⁸ My wife, like millions of others dealing with cancer, found an online community of support, information and other resources provided by amateurs online.

and networks is explosive. But what has brought this new day upon us? People have not changed, but their tools have. These tools allow more people to participate. Shirky points out: “Our new tools haven’t caused those behaviors; but they have allowed them. Flexible, cheap, and inclusive media now offers us opportunities to do all sorts of things we once didn’t do. In the world of “the media,” we were like children, sitting quietly at the edge of a circle and consuming whatever the grown-ups in the center of the circle produced. That has given way to a world in which most forms of communication, public and private, are available to everyone in some form.”²⁹

People are starting to rise up and utilize their newfound ability to connect and collaborate to make the world a better place. This is a wave that is growing, and the numbers of people participating in such endeavors suggests that this wave is ushering in a whole new reality. What used to be a distinctive part of being the church—connecting and collaborating to help people—is now a part of our culture in spectacularly productive new ways. Yet, the church has failed to capitalize on this phenomenon. Why did people not turn to the church to use their excess cognitive surplus? The church either discouraged such efforts, did not have the technological chops to capitalize it, somehow communicated to people that it was not interested in their creative contributions, or would not be a good partner to collaborate with. It has been a very significant missed opportunity.

The Children of the New Day

The urgency to respond to these cultural shifts is simple. Children are being raised in an innovative culture and a collaborative, networked, connected world. Having never

²⁹ Ibid., 63–4.

lived in a world dominated by one-way media, they have never gathered around a television set to hear a white, middle-aged man read the news. They have never experienced the disempowering thought that they could not voice personal opinions. Many of our youth have never lived without being connected to a friend in a different part of the world. With the sense of identity (*we think, therefore we are*), empowerment, and connectedness substantially different than the sensibilities of previous generations at their age; this difference is not one born from nature. Parents and grandparents are, in essence the same. It is the tools that have changed, but, whereas we have had to adopt these new tools, they are native to our children. We were born with limits. They are free to explore without limits. The difference between Gen X, or Gen Y, and the boomers and busters is not a difference in essence. It is a difference of opportunity.³⁰

The critical realization here is that our children are born into this new day. For them, it is not an option (or even a thought) to hold off this day, but to seize it and the opportunities it brings. For the church, we must open ourselves to this new day and all of the foreign tools and the change it brings, lest we be left without connection or relevance. The promise of this new day is that the people of God can organize, connect with and serve God's world in amazing new ways if we so choose. Perhaps, we should let our children lead us.

The Challenge for the Church

This then is the challenge for the church. It needs to acknowledge the advent of social media, innovation, collaboration and the increase in cognitive surplus. The new

³⁰ Ibid.

day has brought with it new realities, which have taken down governments, spawned new economies and changed the very fabric of society. Public and private institutions that adopt innovation, collaboration and social media can move into this new day. This brings opportunity that is filled with challenges, risks and cost. Yet to not move into this new day brings almost certain diminishment. Shirkey talks about “traditional sectors” and the effect of the new media: “...Even more traditional sectors will feel the pull of the (this) in time, not least because the consumers and workforce of the near future will have grown up using the social web to search for and share ideas with one another. They will bring with them the Web’s culture of lateral, semi-structured free association.”³¹

The church faces a population of people, both inside and outside the church, who are experiencing the world in new ways, and who will not be satisfied remaining in a church culture that is of the old day of “sit down and be told.” Remember the warning that Shirkey gave above: “A public sector that does not create platforms for its citizens to create solutions for themselves, together, will soon start to seem old, outdated and tired.”³²

One only needs to substitute the church into this speculation to see the obvious implications. The description “old, outdated and tired” applies to many congregations and denominations. Perhaps this has not happened solely because of cultural indifference about God, but because the church as an institution and meaning-maker is stuck in an old day, inviting people to join an experience that is mediated in old-fashioned ways that do not connect with the children of the new day.

³¹ Ibid., xx–xxi.

³² Ibid., 153.

A New Church for a New Day

What is to be learned for the church to enter fully into this new day? The church will need to embrace innovation and collaboration as organizing principles. It will need to recognize the potential of cognitive surplus and the opportunities it presents. It will need to fully embrace social media and the ways in which it has changed people's experience of themselves and the world. The following is an action report of a most general kind that can guide communities of faith and denominations in their thinking about this new day:

1. *Create an urgency to become an innovative organization.* Take off the tight bonds of constitutions, organizational charts and strategic planning that lead to rigidity and defeat innovation and chase off innovative people. On a micro-level, communities of faith can become constellations of Communities of Practice with each Community of Practice given autonomy and just enough structure to be supported. Pastor-centered churches, or council-driven congregations need to loosen the reigns of control and realize that *we* are smarter and more creative than any one person or small group. Flexibility, the ability to "plan a little and implement a lot," the promotion of a diversity of opinions and the inclusion of "customers" (non-members) in the development of ministry are all aspects of becoming an innovative organization. Experiment a lot, expect and celebrate failure, and learn from everything and any organization can create a culture of innovation without fear.
2. *Embrace and seek out collaboration.* The church is balkanized and isolated. The era of seeking out collaborators within congregations and across denominations, with other public institutions and private enterprises, is here.

Globalization is easier, and there is no need to be limited any longer by geography or the accident of specific place. We can, and need, to connect our people to one another, connect our communities to one another, and to connect to the world in many and various ways. Seek collaboration with as many people as possible, and use collaboration to gain access to new ideas, new problems and new possibilities. Put ideas out to meet other ideas and let them build on one another. The church as a platform for collaboration is an exciting metaphor, and will lead the church in unexpected directions—and can be used by the Holy Spirit in its typical fashion.

3. *Become a Community of Practice* that allow for connected leaders to emerge where community structure and life is designed in an artful and minimalist way to gently cultivate an innovative, creative and connected community that will produce spectacular fruit. This will be addressed in detail later in this work.
4. *Pay attention to the realities of cognitive surplus.* People are moving away from sitting and listening, and are taking their talents, passions and abilities to places that demonstrate ability to do social good. The church should be leading this parade, but it is on the sidelines. People are eager to do good. They are able to organize in new ways, but not so eager to join a church. Perhaps more permeable boundaries should be considered, and initiatives made more public and accessible. People can also join with and celebrate the success of the good that is done in the world as part of God's work, not in competition with the church.

5. *Fully embrace social media.* The mission of the church is to connect and communicate. The greatest revolution in connection and in communication is happening all around, but churches are hesitant at best, frozen at worst. Half-hearted and fearful attempts to embrace social media are not enough; it is time for the church, in all of its expressions, to embrace and utilize the tools now available.

Telephones were first invented so that the music of the concert halls of London could be shared across the Atlantic. No one thought that they were to facilitate conversation (users always define the utility of the invention). Then, in the developed world, a whole infrastructure developed around landlines. Telephones were used for person-to-person conversation. With the advent of digital communications and pervasive computing, smart phones have now changed what a phone is, how it is used (this is still changing) and what is needed to support the new network. Telephones are now so much more: they are cameras, videos, computers and links to everyone everywhere all the time. Smart phones are just the beginning of this new day. As a metaphor, it seems as if the church is an old “Baby Bell,” a remnant organization with a way of communicating that seems familiar, but more nostalgic than helpful, holding all sorts of infrastructure that no one really wants to maintain anymore, and with a management system that is not transferable into this new day.

The last time the church led a new day in communication was the Reformation, Luther and Gutenberg. That collaboration of technical innovation married to a theological revolution changed the world, and birthed a new expression of the church and a new vitality to the faith. This new day finds the church oddly either indifferent or in denial

about the changes that have happened all around it. It is time to wake up to this new day and seize it for the glory of God.

CHAPTER FOUR: INNOVATIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Innovation and creativity come from God. It is on display throughout the cosmos, manifest in every detail of this world and expressed in every individual. Created in the image of God, each person is given a creative spirit with a desire to create, to express imagination and voice, and to give glory to God. Christ followers are commissioned in baptism to join with Jesus in his Kingdom work, healing, restoring, and reconciling. In this, Christians are to employ all of their gifts in love and service to their neighbor. Following Jesus is an inherently creative and innovative act, manifesting the Spirit of Jesus in our own time, with our own voice and hands. God delights to see us love God and our neighbor with everything we have, and rejoices to see our creative expressions of love in our daily life.

For those of who serve and lead in a faith community, they are asked to do more than use their own gifts; they are to deploy the gifts of all of the people. Yet often leaders find themselves yoked to an organizational design that does not serve that purpose. Congregational life is often organized in such a way as to stifle creativity and innovation.

The question that is central to this work is this: “How can we make the most of the cultural shift towards collaboration, creativity and connectedness to better manifest Jesus in the world?” This question is especially important because congregations are made up of people. People, by definition, are uniquely gifted, empowered, and called by the Spirit of God to follow Jesus into the world. The irony of this is that the church is neither embracing the cultural shift towards participation and innovation, nor honoring the gifts of its people—gifts given to them by God. As an organization the opportunity

that this cultural shift provides is missing. In terms of mission, organizational structures and leadership models are handicapping innovation. It is time to learn how to organize communities of faith to release the creative power of faith. This chapter seeks to help some in this regard by a brief study of the current thought around innovative organizations and innovative leaders.¹

Creativity and Innovation as Social Processes

Earlier in this work, it was discussed that creativity and innovation are *social processes*, even though they are often thought of as attributes of an individual. Tim Brown, the founder and visionary behind the amazing Design Thinking company IDEO says: “There is a popular saying around IDEO that ‘all of us are smarter than any of us,’ and this is the key to unlocking the creative power of any organization.”² In short, organizations learn as an organization and they learn faster and better if they use the intelligence of all of the people. Learning is communal; it is social.

To state that creativity and innovation are primarily a social process, it becomes evident that organizations, like congregations and denominations, can, by intention or neglect, effectively promote creativity and innovation or block, limit or defeat it. Innovation is also not simply innate, or the gift given just to the few. Steven Johnson, points out that some of myths around innovation need to be corrected: “The first is this distinct assumption that innovation can—and should—be cultivated; that it wasn’t just something that would magically emerge on its own from the folkloric Entrepreneurial

² Tim Brown and Barry Katz, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York, NY: Harper Business, 2009), 26.

American Spirit. Innovation could be taught, encouraged, supported—or suppressed—thanks to decisions that we made as a society.”³ The church has not taught innovation, nor supported it through its organizational design. No wonder we are missing the benefits of this cultural shift.

Creativity is generally defined as “the development of new or novel ideas, appropriate for their context, that have value.”⁴ Innovation is defined as “the effort to create purposeful, focused change in an enterprise’s economic or social potential.”⁵ For an organization to be innovative, then, it needs to sustain an environment that promotes new and novel ideas that have value. They do so by adopting values, expectations and organizational designs that support this work.

Innovative organizations structure themselves in ways that focus the organizations’ energy and resources to deliver new ideas in ways that maximize the organizations’ mission. One important concept that has helped organizations cultivate innovation is Design Thinking. Companies at the leading edge of innovation have used the concept to harness the innovative potential of profit and non-profit companies and institutions.

Design Thinking is a human-centered approach that takes traditional problem solving and begins to think of it as a project, with a beginning, middle and end, rather than a problem. Design Thinking is essentially a social process of creativity and innovation that often leads to break-through change. For a church that on both the micro

³ Steven Johnson, *The Innovator’s Cookbook: Essentials for Inventing What is Next* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2011), Loc. 92–94, Kindle.

⁴ Nancy K. Napier and Mikael Nilsson, *The Creative Discipline: Mastering the Art and Science of Innovation* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008), ivx.

⁵ Johnson, Loc. 153, Kindle.

level (congregations) and macro level (denominations) is facing a significantly changing and challenging cultural context, the potential to help usher in a new future is exciting.

By nature, this approach tends to lead to far more than mere incremental change. The thought of congregations using the tool of Design Thinking to create new ways of “doing” mission and ministry is exciting. It may prove to be a move of the Spirit. God has given the church people who are filled with gifts, imagination and creativity. A systematic process of Design Thinking might be able to maximize the creative power of the church, and lead to innovations that will advance its mission in the world.

The Innovation Gap

In every expression of the church (and across denominations), leaders talk about the huge challenges that face the church today. Cultural shifts have led to diminished participation, relevancy and impact. A difficulty in attracting leaders remains. Donor bases have shrunk. The reputation of the church and its place in the public square has diminished. Twenty years ago, we were debating if these shifts were real. Now there is no debate. The reality of these cultural shifts has set in—there is no longer a sense that this is temporary or insignificant—and consensus has arrived that we are in a very different reality. Further, the culture is not done changing, and will certainly never return to “Christendom.”

One of the key changes already noted is the way in which people are connecting, creating and innovating at work, home, and even as a means to affect social change. The economy has become an experiential economy, where both profit and non-profits are designing products and services to deliver experiences that enhance the lives of their customers. This has promoted the rise of the “Creative Class,” popularized by Richard

Florida, and described by Steven Johnson as: a group whose members “engage in work whose function is to create meaningful new forms. The super creative core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as the “thought leadership” of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts, and other opinion makers.”⁶ Johnson goes on to gauge the size of this group of people: “The creative class now includes some 38.3 million Americans, roughly 30 percent of the entire U.S. workforce—up from just 10 percent at the turn of the twentieth century and less than 20 percent as recently as 1980.”⁷ The creative class is growing, and the way we “do” church will matter to them.

Increased innovation, the advent of social media, the rise of the creative class, the development of an experiential economy and the impact of the Web have led to a massive change in the culture. Any organization that does not take advantage of these shifts is at risk. The majority of congregations and denominational structures are hierarchical and put the responsibility and opportunity for creative innovation at the top of the organization with groups such as boards and councils. This dependency on top-down innovation has two negative consequences.

First, as an organization faces the challenge of a changing culture (or marketplace) it needs both an increased volume of ideas and boldness of ideas. Claude Legrand, a leading teacher of innovation said: “The most effective way to lead through

⁶ Johnson, Loc. 839–842, Kindle.

⁷ Ibid., Loc. 864–865, Kindle.

complexity is to apply innovative thinking.”⁸ Relying on a small number of “innovators” and over-reliance on traditional solutions are inadequate responses to a time of complex change. Denominations with a reliance on a central bureaucracy and congregations that are overly reliant on the professional clergy, traditional habits and a top-down organizational chart are in danger. The church has valued innovation and creativity too little. It has placed the responsibility for innovation in the hands of too few.

It is self-evident that organizational intelligence goes up significantly if the entire organization is empowered to participate in the creative process of imagining, creating and delivering its mission. The most successful organizations of our time have embedded innovation throughout the organization. Organizations that have scaled quickly demonstrate this. Instead of studying and copying the organizations that promote innovation and creativity, the church has copied its organizational structure from the industrial economy. That explains some things. Weiss and Legrand point out the difference between how the industrial economy and the knowledge economy channel innovation:

In the industrial economy, an organization could ask a few elite leaders to be innovative and focus everyone else on simply doing the work. When a problem happened, it was escalated to the elite “thinkers,” who solved the problem and communicated the ‘right’ decision throughout the organization. In the knowledge economy, there is a need for all employees to use their intellectual potential because the nature of work is constantly changing and presenting complex challenges at every level of organizations. In this new economy, better solutions can only come from new ways of thinking—innovative thinking—not from conventional linear analytical thinking alone.⁹

⁸ David S Weiss and Claude Legrand, *Innovative Intelligence: The Art and Practice of Leading Sustainable Innovation in Your Organization* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), Loc. 561, Kindle.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Loc. 405–410, Kindle.

This over-reliance on hierarchy leads to complacency and disenfranchisement. As one observer puts it, “When organizations depend upon a few people for ideas, or worse, allow structural inefficiency, like ingrained hierarchy, to limit ideas, employees feel reluctant or apathetic about speaking up.”¹⁰ Just insert the word “members” in place of “employees” and you see the direct application to the state of our congregations and denominations.

Dependency on top down structures leads to a second negative consequence. Change is too slow. Organizations that build distance and time between an idea and its execution can never change rapidly enough. Organizations such as these do not create enough experiments. There is not enough iteration of change to rapidly test possibilities, and there is often no effective feedback loop. If these things are missing, “tweaks” and adjustments never are enough. Organizational consultant Nancy Napier quotes one of her clients, “Our CEO is an idea guy—he’s always got a new idea. [But] he’s at the head of something with a very long tail. From an R&D [research and design] standpoint, any idea takes six, eight, twelve months to actually end up in the product.” Churches and denominations do not ship product, but they do provide services, and this quote describes many of the efforts of denominational heads and leaders of congregations: too much bureaucracy, too many committees, and too long of a distance for innovation to travel both upstream and downstream. The feedback loop is ineffectual or non-existent.

It may be that centralized thinking in today’s world simply does not work. Profit and non-profits are scrapping long-range planning process because they simply have not worked. As our cohort conversations often commented on, the church needs to pay more

¹⁰ Napier and Nilsson, 187–188.

attention to its locality—its micro-context—and to the community it serves. This is not simply an effect due to lack of attention, or focus. It is an effect of inappropriate organizational design.

This has left the church without the ability to be nimble or responsive to challenges and opportunities. Centralized plans simply cannot deliver the missional strategies needed. Napier and Nilsson write, “Strategy research indicates that an organization’s capabilities and unique position emerges as the result of many small and large decisions and work. Seldom are great strategic decisions the singular reason for success and competitive advantage. Making an organization creative requires creative decisions and actions across levels and units within the organization.”¹¹

Speaking from personal experience, my formal seminary education prepared me to be the “answer person” for the congregations I served, theologically and practically. The authority of the ordained pastor meant that the communities I served deferred to my judgment on practically all matters where I inserted myself. I was not trained to help a congregation marshal the creativity of all the people. I was not given the tools necessary to design a process or a culture that would create an innovation engine to deliver mission. My experience echoed the training offered to a whole generation of clergy. By over-structuring ourselves and centralizing innovation in either the clergy or a committee structure, one must ask: What have we lost?

We have lost the creative power of our people, and now that the cultural shifts have overwhelmed us, we have congregations that are dying. What is ironic is that many of the people that are intentionally standing outside our communities do so because they

¹¹ Ibid., 188.

are convinced that congregations will not honor their gifts of creativity nor invite their collaboration in any significant way. The people who can help us solve this problem are being disenfranchised because of the nature of the problem.

There is a whole generation that is predisposed to come together to shape this world (for the good) through collaborative effort. They do not see the church as being a vehicle to bring them together to accomplish good. For an institution that was founded on the basis of Jesus inviting people into participating in the Kingdom he was announcing, it is a bitter irony.

Tim Brown, of IDEO, talks of the benefits to be gained by embracing a culture of innovation:

There is an important lesson here about the challenges of shifting from a culture of hierarchy and efficiency to one of risk taking and exploration. Those who navigate this transition successfully are likely to become more deeply engaged, more highly motivated, and more wildly productive than they have ever been before. They will show up early and stay late because of the enormous satisfaction they get from giving form to new ideas and putting them out into the world. Once they have experienced this feeling, few people will be willing to give it up.¹²

There is hope here. To commit ourselves to becoming communities that value connection, creativity, collaboration and participation is the path forward. It also is the best way to connect with people who are now standing outside the communities. It seems clear that one of the pressing needs of the church is to become an innovative organization and develop innovative cultures and leaders to support it.

The Spaces of Innovation

¹² Brown, Loc. 474–478, Kindle.

One of the Dr. Len Sweet insights our cohort has referred to most is the acronym WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Developed. Sweet would often label an idea or concept “WEIRD” and we immediately know that he is challenging a cultural context that underlies the idea. One of the tendencies of those of us who grew up WEIRD is to turn every process into a linear exercise, one step after another. It would be a mistake to conceive of innovation or Design Thinking as a linear process.

Innovation is a series of three overlapping spaces, which are experienced as a kind of dance with movement back and forth. This dance is done in the context of a “project” (not a problem) that has constraints and is defined by a design question, or a brief. Let’s take these concepts one at a time.

One of the great insights of Design Thinking is the resistance to solving “problems” and the conscious re-framing of an issue into a “project” that has a beginning, middle and an end. This project is set out in a design brief that clearly states a question to be explored and acknowledges constraints. Here is Brown’s description of a design brief:

The classic starting point of any project is the brief. Almost like a scientific hypothesis, the brief is a set of mental constraints that gives the project team a framework from which to begin, benchmarks by which they can measure progress, and a set of objectives to be realized: price point, available technology, market segment, and so on. The analogy goes even further. Just as a hypothesis is not the same as an algorithm, the project brief is not a set of instructions or an attempt to answer a question before it has been posed. Rather, a well-constructed brief will allow for serendipity, unpredictability, and the capricious whims of fate, for that is the creative realm from which breakthrough ideas emerge. If you already know what you are after, there is usually not much point in looking.¹³

The constraints acknowledged in a design brief could best be categorized as: feasibility, viability, and desirability. Feasibility asks “Can we imagine be able to do this?”;

¹³ Ibid., 293–298.

Viability asks if it would work if we tried. Finally, desirability checks to see if it makes sense to people and if they will use it if it were offered. Design Thinking embraces constraints, and seeks to bring them into balance while delivering something innovative.

The design brief is then brought into the three “spaces” of innovation: *Inspiration*, *Ideation* and *Implementation*: (The process I am referring to here is borrowed extensively from IDEO and Tim Brown).

We can think of them as inspiration, the problem or opportunity that motivates the search for solutions; ideation, the process of generating, developing, and testing ideas; and implementation, the path that leads from the project room to the market. Projects may loop back through these spaces more than once as the team refines its ideas and explores new directions. The reason for the iterative, nonlinear nature of the journey is not that design thinkers are disorganized or undisciplined but that design thinking is fundamentally an exploratory process; done right, it will invariably make unexpected discoveries along the way, and it would be foolish not to find out where they lead.¹⁴

The Inspiration space is where the design team begins to observe real people and their experiences without focus groups or survey monkeys, but rather field observation, trying to gain insight as to how people are really experiencing a given situation, service or product:

This is one of the key sources of design thinking, and it does not usually come from reams of quantitative data that measure exactly what we already have and tell us what we already know. A better starting point is to go out into the world and observe the actual experiences of commuters, skateboarders, and registered nurses as they improvise their way through their daily lives. The only way we can get to know them is to seek them out where they live, work, and play. Accordingly, almost every project we undertake involves an intensive period of observation. We watch what people do (and do not do) and listen to what they say (and do not say). This takes some practice.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., Loc. 214–220, Kindle.

¹⁵ Brown, Loc. 555–557, Kindle.

As a simple example, imagine if a congregation would develop a design question such as, “How can we be the most welcoming place on a Sunday morning?” Rather than send out surveys, or convene a focus group, they would begin to actually observe people interacting with their congregation. They would watch how they experience the parking lot, the way-finding, how they are acknowledged, greeted and helped until they leave the facility. Then, based on observation, they can begin to ideate.

One of the mantras of Design Thinking is “Don’t think, look.” The first task of Inspiration is to *observe* like an anthropologist and to *inquire* like a sociologist to gain insight and empathy, an “emotional understanding” of how people are actually experiencing what you are testing. This requires objectivity, previous and even long-standing presumptions about how people “should” behave, or what we assume that they feel have to be set aside for real-time observation and inquiry about what really happens. This takes time, because it involves quality observation as opposed to quantity of observation to make sure one is observing sometimes “extreme” behaviors (such as observing the most un-churched person) so that you are capturing behaviors that will give you the most insight.

This period of inquiry is *functional*: how are people actually experiencing this? It is also *cognitive*: how are people making sense out of this? It is also *emotional*: how do these people feel when they are experiencing this? What is touching them? Again, with our WEIRD wiring, we often do not look past the functional. Interestingly enough, the word most often used by IDEO to describe this period of inspiration is the word

“empathy.”¹⁶ Design Thinking, from the start, is a very human-centered study of experiences. The secret is to assess someone’s actual emotional experience in real time, which is a tremendously empathetic act. As Christians, it is exciting to think that we could embrace a process of missional innovation that was empathetic by design.

After observation comes *storytelling*. The design team weaves together small and large stories to build a meta-narrative of sorts that describes the observed human behaviors and begins to form a *synthesis* that organizes the data and the interpretation of that data so that the team can begin the creative process of ideation.

Ideation involves *brainstorming*, a process of divergent thinking that multiplies options to create choices. Two-time Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling says, “To have a good idea, you must first have lots of ideas.” As the project team, newly armed with synthesized understandings of the human behaviors they have studied, brainstorms possible ways to address the needs now understood, they move back and forth from *divergent thinking*—get as many ideas as possible—to *convergent thinking*—narrowing options and making choices about which idea to develop, and how. They take their time, but eventually deal with the given constraints and begin to develop possible solutions. The way they do this is to begin to make iterations such as prototypes and role-plays. Each new iteration, each effort becomes a little more honed and perfected than the previous one.

Prototypes are invaluable. A prototype can be a physical object, or it can be an imagined or role-played scenario (The Johnsons come to church for the first time, for

¹⁶ It is ironic that they call this “empathy,” which it is. Contrast this with much church thinking about “unchurched” people and all of the presumptions of how people “should” behave. We have, it seems, lost our empathy.

example). Prototypes “slow you down to speed you up” by providing something to test out, to see, to question, and to “try on.” Prototyping can also inspire new ideas and directions, and should begin early in the process to weed out bad ideas and demonstrate promising ones.

As the team moves out of the ideation space, they move into the Implementation space. The team must be aware that, no matter what artifact or process has been developed, a real person will experience it. A real person must test the prototype in real time, in the real world. It is never just about a product, or a Bible study, or a worship service; it is about giving a real person an experience that will give them meaning. Everything is an experience, and every experience gives meaning. The experience one has designed will give meaning, and prototyping will ensure that it is the meaning intended.

Once the team has a meaningful experience designed, it is time to experiment with it, and that is the point of entry to the implementation space of the innovation process. Now, prototypes become experiments and experiments become refined and new practices are born.

Innovation can be scary, bringing forth a new idea, process or ministry risks money, time and human capital. It can be a distraction. Costs and risks are well taken, if the results are successful. It is wise to minimize risk during this stage. There is a metaphor that can illustrate how to minimize risk in the implementation stage. It involves bullets and cannon balls. Thanks to the amazing Jim Collins:

Picture yourself at sea, a hostile ship bearing down on you. You have a limited amount of gunpowder. You take all your gunpowder and use it to fire a big cannonball. The cannonball flies out over the ocean...and misses the target, off by 40 degrees. You turn to your stockpile and discover that

you're out of gunpowder. You die. But suppose instead that when you see the ship bearing down, you take a little bit of gunpowder and fire a bullet. It misses by 40 degrees. You make another bullet and fire. It misses by 30 degrees. You make a third bullet and fire, missing by only 10 degrees. The next bullet hits—ping!—the hull of the oncoming ship. Now, you take all the remaining gunpowder and fire a big cannonball along the same line of sight, which sinks the enemy ship. You live.¹⁷

The application of this metaphor is simple: as an organization begins to move between the ideation and the implementation spaces of innovation, it will need to experiment. For organizations that are limited in money, time and attention, it makes sense to start those experiments small. An empirical test attempts to test what will work. A test that is low cost, low risk and low distraction is a “bullet.” Using a bullet will allow an organization to assess the test to see if the outcome was intended. The organization can then consider if a bigger experiment is merited, i.e., a “cannon ball.”

If a bigger experiment is warranted, then the organization moves precious resources and fires the cannon ball. If a bigger experiment is not warranted, meaning the test did not provide the desired result, then the organization shoots another bullet like the first one. The organization repeats this process until they are successful. The underlying assumption is that the organization is willing to make some empirical judgments that will validate the experiment. All too often, congregations and denominations resist measurements or empirical data of any sort. Great organizations aspire to measurable, tangible results.

Imagination, ideation and implementation are the three spaces of innovation. The design brief is key. The discipline to observe is a must. The ability to move between the three spaces until you have arrived at a solution is a skill. All three spaces are necessary,

¹⁷ James C. Collins and Morten T. Hansen, *Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck: Why Some Thrive Despite Them All*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), Loc. 1298–1303, Kindle.

and with repetition, this process gets more natural. The three spaces of innovation are important to bring to all parts of the organization if the organization desires to be innovative. To build a truly innovative organization is to build a culture of innovation. As Peter Drucker famously said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Culture endures. Without a supporting culture, no organization can be innovative.

The Culture of Innovative Organizations

“Learning to be, not learning about.”

If Innovation is to take root in a congregation or a denomination, it must be supported by the culture and habits of the organization. Earlier, the concept of Communities of Practice has been mentioned, and it will be dealt with extensively in the next chapter. Communities of Practice are social learning constructs, and as such, can be vessels that are infused with a culture of innovation. Values are used to form cultures. Here are some of the important values that will support a culture of innovation within Communities of Practice:

- Rich vision (as the CEO of Starbucks, Harvey Schulz put it, “Who wants a dream that is near-fetched?”);
- Diversity of thought and experience that invites all voices;
- Risk-taking, or the tackling of what Google refers to as “wicked problems”;
- Failures as vital learning opportunities;
- Innovation as a systematic process, not a personality type (everyone can be an innovator and part of a collaborative effort of innovation);
- Observation and mindfulness, the activity Albert Einstein referred to as “the enjoyment of seeing and searching”;

- People’s unique design to help them find ways to make their contribution in mission;
- Empowerment, equipment and support of self-directed teams and groups;
- Low barriers to participation (by easily welcoming people to participate in innovation, the creative potential of the Community is maximized);
- High degree of information sharing;
- Stories that embrace innovation, creativity and Design Thinking;
- Focus on human experiences; and
- Flat structure and hierarchy.

A Beautifully Designed Community

“When I’m working on a problem, I never think about beauty. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.”¹⁸

There is something about a beautifully designed community: it has poetry, and it resonates with joy and peace. I believe that a community that harnesses the creativity of the people—which is, in essence, the same as harnessing the creativity of the Spirit—is a beautiful community. Buckminster Fuller’s illustration used by Marty Neumeier is a beautiful example of how beauty is found in nature:

In mathematics, Poincaré could judge the quality of a solution solely on its aesthetic elegance. Software developers can spot a great algorithm by the shape and efficiency of its coding lines. There’s ample evidence of mathematical beauty in nature, too, including the breathtaking complexity of fractals, the surprising consilience of theories across disciplines, and the ancient sacred ratios of geometry. Take the Fibonacci sequence. The formula is like a children’s game: Each number in the sequence is the sum of the previous two, giving you a progression that looks like 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, and so on. In nature, this progression shows up in the patterns of pine cones and palm trees. It shows up in

¹⁸ Buckminster Fuller, as quoted by Marty Neumeier, *The Designful Company: How to Build a Culture of Nonstop Innovation* (Berkeley, CA: Pearson Education, 2009), Loc. 612–613, Kindle.

artichoke leaves and broccoli florets. It shows up in the shapes of nautilus shells, whose walls spiral outward according to the same laws.¹⁹

In his notebook, Leonardo da Vinci said that we “will never discover an invention more beautiful, easier, or more economical than nature’s...In her inventions nothing is wanting and nothing is superfluous.” Steve Job called design “the soul of a man-made creation.” In the New Testament, the followers of Jesus are described by a metaphor of beauty found in nature: the human body. We are to be organized in such a way that every member of the body is an honored and valued part of the whole. As we design Communities of Practice and innovation, it should be no surprise that in doing so we begin to once again honor every member, value every experience and invite all to be a part of the whole. In this, design beautiful communities are designed.

People as Ministry Designers

What has been discussed so far might easily be assumed to be limited to the creative power of the people that are already a part of church communities. But what if another cultural trend is followed? What if we began to believe that the people we are attempting to serve and reach need to be included in the Design Thinking and innovation of our ministries?

In what cannot be overstated, there is a huge move on the part of for-profits to include their customers/clients/users in the design process. The most obvious result is that it allows the product or service development to be leaner and more focused; real users are helping define and design the product or service involved. The by-product of this is that the customer or user base becomes extremely invested in the product or service because

¹⁹ Ibid., Loc. 613–616, Kindle.

they were allowed in on the design process. I have no evidence to offer on this point, but I am very curious to see how congregations might use “non-members” or “un-churched” folks to help design mission and ministry. If corporations can use customers to design computers or cereal, we surely can use people to help design the ministry that is meant to engage them. Johnson cites some illustrative examples: “Many companies already offer so-called product configurators that enable consumers to obtain a mass-customized version of a standard product. Dell customers, for example, can select components (a disk drive, monitor, memory modules, and so on) from a menu to assemble the computer best suited to their needs. Eyeglass frames, automobiles, and even Barbie dolls can be similarly configured. In fact, no application seems too trivial. General Mills is planning to introduce a Web site that will allow consumers to mix and match more than a hundred ingredients to create their own breakfast cereal.”²⁰ So, what will the parallel example be with congregations? Family-based and designed faith formation for the household? Self-directed missions projects? The list is probably endless, but perspectives on how to do ministry have to adjust. Johnson experienced the process of introducing new truths to organizations, his observation is spot on: “Every truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”²¹

Questions

²⁰ Johnson, Loc.1409–1412, Kindle.

²¹ Ibid., Loc. 1687–1689, Kindle.

There are important questions to be addressed. The response to these questions will form the basis of a practical application resulting from this work. This application will be used with my community of faith, and also serve as an example of how to use the concepts of Community of Practice based on innovation, creativity and Design Thinking for other congregational leaders and the communities they serve.

First, how can we create a culture of innovation in our congregations that can respond to the culture of participation we find ourselves in? This will take courage and perseverance, because it is a cultural change. These can be difficult and painful for some. Most cultural changes happen when a small part of the whole experiments with innovative practices, and the success of those initiatives become inspirational models for other parts of the organization to follow. Leadership needs to commit to innovation and support the early initiatives until the whole organization is caught up in the cultural change.

Second, how can we use Communities of Practice as a model for congregational design? This model seems to resonate well with our current culture. It promotes collaboration, connection, and creativity. People's voices are heard, they are encouraged to share their gifts, and make a unique difference in the world and be a part of a greater whole.

Third, can Design Thinking and a culture of innovation be used to reach more people? People want to be creators of the things that they participate in; they want to make a difference. For many, the church has become predictable and uninterested in their input. To change the way the church engages with people, the more it collaborates with them, the better connection will be made with the people immersed in this culture.

Conclusion

The world has changed. Innovators that captured the wave started with the advent of the Internet and social media. They have harnessed the interest of people who want to connect, create and collaborate. Even though generations of digital natives are now among us, they have not fundamentally changed; they are beloved children of God. They have been created by the love of God, and animated with the Spirit of God. The person of Jesus came for them to show them what it means to be human, to be connected with God, and to join in God's great work in the world—to love the neighbor and provide for every beloved child of God. Love and grace are still mediated person to person. The church still has a place in God's world and a mission to live out. We need to make sure that the form of the church matches the missional challenge of each generation, and be smart enough to bring with us the things that matter, and leave behind the things that belong in a time now past.

CHAPTER FIVE:
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND THE EMERGENCE OF A CULTURE OF
PARTICIPATION

Excellence is no longer defined as the quality of the performance, but rather the quality of the interaction between the performer and the audience.¹ Legitimate participation, belonging, input, and influence are increasingly expressed in a demand for creative expression. This demands a merging of the acts of consuming and producing experience and media. Organizations must think anew about how they engage with people. Even the most basic activities that have worked well for long periods of time now need to be re-thought. The following example is a description of the design effort behind the Brooklyn Children’s Museum as they re-imagined how to engage children with its artifacts. This brought about a shift in emphasis from the artifacts to the experience of the visitors:

The environment needed to feel as if it belonged to the visitors. The audience had to decide how they wanted to explore it; they couldn’t simply be told. The museum needed to be a new kind of place that welcomed its audience, showing them that they were respected, that they could learn, and that their ignorance was not a burden but actually an asset to the experience. The idea was for it to be a set of tools with which people could experiment—interacting with one another as well as with the museum itself—rather than artifacts that were perceived as being more valuable than the children experimenting. The aim was to eliminate any intermediary between the children and their process of exploration.²

With just a few word changes in this description, one could be talking about a congregation instead of a museum, and the point would be the same. For a culture

¹ Edwin Schlossberg, *Interactive Excellence: Defining and Developing New Standards for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1998).

² *Ibid.*, 57–58.

increasingly measuring its willingness to join in any experience based on the ability to legitimately interact within it, the church more and more looks like the museums of the past. The church is replete with artifacts that are indeed perceived as more valuable than people, with no more impactful desire than to engage people in “passive wonder” or to lecture them about orthodoxy:

Most entertainment and museum experiences are not designed to engage the visitor in anything more than passive wonder. Such displays and spectacles do not engage visitors in conversation, but simply “lecture” them about a particular idea. The drawback to this approach is that if visitors do not have any existing context into which to fit the new idea, the lecture is usually ignored.³

Participation involves the whole person. At its most original impulse, following Jesus was a “whole person” experience. The earliest Christian communities were distinctive because of how they engaged the whole person in a full emersion in a new expression of community.⁴ Social barriers were broken down, learning happened in community, compassion was demonstrated, roles were flattened, and authority was shared. The church began as a truly participatory experience. However, in its current context, and given the ways people now mediate their lives, the church is one of the least participatory institutions in our culture.

In many congregations, worship is the least participatory activity one can experience in our culture today. The sermon is a one-way monologue that has no parallel in any other medium. Even compared to a TED talk, typical sermons lack an understanding of how a speaker connects to an audience. Use of visuals, the role of

³ Ibid., 69–70.

⁴ Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2.

storytelling, and the technique of the speaker are underdeveloped. Today’s preachers were trained in homiletical methods developed in previous decades and in a different cultural context. As a result, efforts are springing up in many forms from “curating worship”⁵ to Len Sweet’s EPIC design and Missional, Relational and Incarnational⁶ metaphors for the church and the various forms of emergent worship that are attempts to bridge this divide. These efforts are small, not widespread, often used in church startup settings, and generally resisted by established congregations. This is an interesting dynamic universally experienced by my more progressive peers. The existing congregation of “well-churched” Christians resist new forms of preaching designed to reach the “less-churched”. Appropriate commentary regarding Matthew 28 can be inserted here.

The emerging culture of participation does not only clash with worship and preaching practice; theology is most often taught in traditional formats of lecture by the professional clergy. Further, as previously discussed, congregations have implemented structures of organization that are rigid and adverse to creativity and innovation. By vocabulary, organization, and practice, the church has shut itself off from the majority culture with outsiders perceiving Christianity to be a club only certain people can join.⁷

⁵ For example, see Jonny Baker, *Curating Worship* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2011); and Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis, MN: Sparkhouse Press, 2010).

⁶ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church: Missional, Relational, Incarnational* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009).

⁷ David Kinnaman and Fermi Project, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 123.

The advent of the Internet brought many new ways of experiencing and being in the world. It allows people to be more connected, and offers them media, forums and tools of creativity that were not available before. It also is a vehicle for a whole new sense of belonging and collaboration. The second generation of Internet reality (Web 2.0), and the learning that is streaming forth from it, is instructive here. One recent study found that 69 percent of all US-American adults and teens consume citizen media content. 54 percent of US-American adults and teens edit their own music, VIDEO or photos, and 32 percent see themselves as broadcasters of their own media material.⁸ Clearly, people are finding it deeply satisfying to create and distribute material that carries not only self-expression, but forms identity and creates meaning as well.

Web 2.0 is different from Web 1.0 in that the initial expression of the Internet (Web 1.0) allowed people to contribute content, but did so in a limited way; it was much like people tending to individual gardens. In contrast, Web 2.0 now constitutes an emerging movement that is more like collection of community gardens, with more and more people collaborating to create and share that which they produce.⁹ This kind of collaborative creativity has many benefits, including an increasing ability to create community and affect social change. Community is no longer about proximity. Social change can now rise up in new and more powerful ways. The rise of the social capital that is generated in networks spanning countries, continents and cultures and is used for the benefit of many is a gathering movement that is changing the connectivity of people

⁸ David Gauntlett, *Participation Culture, Creativity, and Social Change* (University of Westminster, OT, 2008).

⁹ Ibid.

in new ways. As Clay Shirkey, a prominent commentator on the connective nature of the Web says, "...digital technology is allowing ancient motivations of generosity and participation to manifest themselves on a public stage, of a much larger scale and duration than ever before."¹⁰

Alcoholics Anonymous captures the power of the transformation in a way that is demonstrably more tangible than the way mainline churches experience or talk about transformation. In a similar way, the advent of Web 2.0 is capturing an aspect of networking, compassion and generosity that is more tangible than the church's ability to network people for the sake of compassion and social change. As people find ever-expanding ways to participate in the world, the church as congregation must change to meet the new expectations of participation and excellence that is being raised. Reaching back into the past, we find some words and a sensibility that now seems ahead of its time. Woody Guthrie had a copyright notice that read: "This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright 154085 for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singing it without our permission, will be good friends of ours, cause we don't give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that's all we wanted to do." This now seems like a contemporary statement, it certainly reflects the spirit of our times.

Increasingly, this is the world as presented in Web 2.0. Anyone can produce material, and anyone else can use it, enjoy it, build on it and send it out into the world again. As generations now grow up in, or are "native to," a world view that invites full participation in creativity, design and collaboration, congregations will need to match this

¹⁰ Clay Shirkey, 2010. "Google Talks: Cognitive Surplus," Authors@Google, accessed July 14, 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cognitive_surplus_will_change_the_world.

with a new self-understanding with an organizational design that can match it. To do so would be faithful to Lutheran concepts of vocation, re-formation and the “priesthood of all believers.” It would return the church to the vitality of the first century church and provide a new context for ministry in the 21st century.

Media Theory

Reality does not exist independently from the media that it is experienced through. From the first storytellers and cave painters, to the poets, writers, scribes, printers, photographers, musicians and web designers of today, reality is mediated. Often in human history, media has changed slowly. At other times, media is revolutionized. We are in such a time. Each new media has unique capabilities and limits, and changes the way we experience the world.

At every stage of its existence, new media has profoundly influenced the church. For some periods of its history, the church mastered the media of its day, such as Martin Luther’s use of the emerging technology of the printing press. Other eras have seen the church at odds with the media of its day. Sometimes the church is an early adopter of new media; other times it gradually adopts media over time. This is true as well of society in general. Every new medium, arriving slowly or in a rush, brings radical change:

A new medium teaches us to see, hear, smell, feel and taste things that were previously outside our reach. This is profit. But there is also a loss: everything we came to know through other media, or without media, is forgotten on the spot. This is why when any new medium is introduced in a society, there are invariably cries that now civilization will truly perish from superficiality, stupidity or forgetfulness.¹¹

¹¹ Arjen Mulder, *Understanding Media Theory: Language, Images, Sound, Behavior* (Rotterdam, NT: V2_Publishing, 2004), 36.

The advent of new media in the form of Web 2.0 has certainly brought about significant changes, many for the good. It has also brought with it the pain of loss. The church is presented with a unique kind of loss.

What is at risk is the further distancing of the church from the main of society. Local congregations are being further removed from the everyday transmission of symbol and meaning. The local congregation is often seen as being of a different era. It is not keeping pace with increased expectations of participation, creativity and collaboration. As new media becomes the norm at work and at home, it has changed the way people wish to be connected to any organization, even a faith community.

Because the church is all about meaning, community, and identity—all of which is being renegotiated by this new medium—the stakes are high. Further, it is not just participation in the medium itself that is needed. In a very real way, the church as the local congregation will have to be remediated, or re-imagined and re-formed through this new culture of participation. It is the only way it will gain a fresh identity and relevance in the world.

Moving forward, one wonders if the church can once again be an organization of participation. In a culture where people seek to connect, create and collaborate, will the church reorganize itself in meaningful ways to engage people the way they wish to be engaged? The risk for the church as it participates in this new culture of participation, is that it opens itself to change it can neither control nor anticipate. The opportunity is that full participation in the culture of participation will lead to church with a fresh identity, newly effective structure, and radically new ways of engaging people.

Communities of Practice: A New Model

Faith development is a whole-person activity; it involves creating and expressing meaning, an evolving sense of identity, the practice of living in the world, and an experience of community with fellow believers. Faith development is also an experience facilitated by media, and hence, it changes with new medial expressions. Congregations are rarely explicitly curious about how to engage people on in terms of meaning, practice, community and identity, and instead fall back on tacit filters of denominational affiliation, confessional alignment and social obligation. Often, congregations are organized in rigid structures that are decades old in form, ossified in the un-self-critical passing down of structures and communal habits, and codified in constitutions and by-laws. None of this suggests that they are prepared or inclined to engage people who have expectations of high degrees of participation, creative input, peripheral participation and collaboration. Thus, it is not surprising that a generation (or two?) of people have left congregational life.

Faith development has much in common with learning. In learning theory, there is an emerging field of work around the social aspects of learning. In social theory of learning, theories of practice, identity, social structure and situated experience come together. The idea of “Communities of Practice” embodies these concepts in a social learning construct, making it a useful framework through which congregations can thrive in a participatory culture.

Communities of Practice help those who participate share the negotiation of *meaning*; join in *practice* through mutual engagement in common action; create *community* with competence and joint enterprise; and establish new *identities*. These are the tasks of Christian community. We are about making meaning in light of God as

revealed in creation, the person of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. The church creates a new Community, centered on the table of Jesus and joined together in a common identity established through baptism. This Community is missional and brings people together to join in the common work of loving the neighbor. Communities of Practice exist all around, and individuals participate in many Communities of Practice throughout their lifetimes. At work, in civic society, and in schools, there are Communities of Practice, but they are rarely ever clearly identified or designated as such.

Communities of Practice is a helpful construct. To help further understand the concept of Communities of Practice, it is necessary to become familiar with certain terms and ideas. What follows are some of the important aspects of Communities of Practice with some commentary, translating these ideas into a new way of imagining congregations as Communities of Practice.¹²

Practice as Meaning

In Communities of Practice, the world is experienced and meaning is negotiated through a process of sustained attention and readjustment. In Communities of Practice, people are actively creating new meaning, and encountering meaning that has sustained over time. They experience both the hard and the changeable realities of the world, and encounter new perspectives and strategies to deal with the world. By saying that they negotiate meaning, it is meant that they are continually interacting with meaning, dancing with it, gaining understanding and entering mystery. People do not just make meanings

¹² For discussion on the concepts dealt within this section see: Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

out of thin air, but it is also true that the world does not simply impose meaning on us. By *participating* in Communities of Practice, people engage in specific activities with specific people, but then go beyond this direct engagement into a negotiation of meaning as a result of participation in the Community of Practice. By engaging in the life and habits of the Community of Practice, people discover meaning. This kind of social learning apparent in the stories of the first century church, and it is experienced in various ways in local congregations today.

Along with participation, another way meaning is negotiated in a Community of Practice is through *reification*, the process by which individuals and communities give form to experience by producing objects that bring experience into the form of “things.” For example, making laws, procedures, policies or tools are forms of reification. Certain understandings are given form. This form becomes a focus through which people negotiate meaning, as people use a law to argue a point, use the procedure to know what to do, or use the tool to perform an action. The church has a rich tradition of reification such as: symbols, texts, confessions, and liturgies.

Reification and *participation* shape an individual’s experience and are the chief ways meaning is negotiated in Communities of Practice. They function as a pair and maintain a balance. They must exist in such proportion that they overcome each other’s limitations. Reification can become rigid, non-adaptable, and its purpose can be misunderstood or forgotten. Participation can be too informal, uncoordinated, localized in concern and un-tethered to purpose. Participation in its healthiest forms organizes itself with just the right amount of reification—such as artifacts, metaphors, and institutional

form and memory—to allow participation to be effective and lasting. This balance is achieved through careful nurture and self-awareness.

Some faith communities have relied much too heavily on reification, and have lost the vitality and special knowing that comes only from participation. Other communities have relied too much upon practice and have not sustained due to the lack of reification. Most significantly, it is the lack of attention to this balance that seems to be the issue. Without a clear self-understanding that a congregation is a Community of Practice, it does not know to carefully attend to the balance between participation and reification.

Practice as Community

Communities of Practice invite *mutual engagement* that brings with it diversity, complex social networks and relationships that are built around commonly held visions and hoped-for outcomes. These communities can cross existing social boundaries and are locations for dynamic social change. A sense of mutual engagement is manifest when individuals are legitimately included in the enterprise, and find ways to uniquely contribute to the work of the whole. This mutual engagement is a *joint enterprise* defined by the participants as they are in the very process of working together. In this work, the participants create a system of mutual accountability, and define excellence and the hoped-for outcomes. Many faith communities lack a sense of mutual engagement and have created a culture where a few individuals act, and others simply watch. Legitimate participation of all is—intentionally or not—discouraged and there is not widespread sense of engagement. The sense of collaboration and co-creation is missing, and, in the context of our current culture, people move on.

Individuals that comprise a Community of Practice *share a repertoire* of talent, vocabulary, strategy, metaphors and other tools. Diversity of perspectives, experiences and viewpoints—opportunities to produce new meanings—have an inherent value as a creative source of new insights and processes. Engagement in shared practice over time is a dynamic form of coordination that spontaneously generates new approaches and meanings that allow it to move into the future.

In so many ways, the concept of Communities of Practice describes the first century church much more than the modern church. One can look at the evidence of the early church story and find mentorship, shared mission and the rich collection of shared community tools and habits. The mainline churches of America are lacking in social, economic and racial diversity, which further limits the diversity of talent, viewpoints and vocabularies that would help a congregation thrive as a Community of Practice.

Practice as Learning

Communities of Practice are sustained through a process of learning. Each Community is dynamic and over time experiences a life cycle of development, change, evolution, division, replication, rebirth and dispersal. Learning is how Communities are able to adapt, troubleshoot and fine-tune their work. They develop vocabulary, style, narratives, tools, processes and a history through learning.

New participants in a Community of Practice create a change reaction of new opportunities for mutual engagement, a re-imagining of the joint enterprise and the creation of a whole new generation of elements in the repertoire. Fundamentally, the introduction of new members is a test of adaptability, but holds the potential for longevity and increased vitality. Here again, the concept of Communities of Practice sounds more

like the first century church than the church of today. We lack the mindset required to legitimize the participation of our newest Community members because we are often too closely tied to the traditions of the past. How many congregations could actually claim that they invite new participants to re-imagine the joint enterprise of the Community? Too often, the newest members are welcomed with the words (or the unspoken attitude), “We have never done it that way.”

Communities of Practice are, by definition, *emergent structures*: dynamic, adaptive, resilient, and open. Members define the enterprise as they participate. The Community learns, matures and changes in uncharted ways, a continually emergent organization until it ceases to be.

Practice as Boundary Setting

There are boundaries formed around Communities of Practice. These boundaries can be more or less permeable. Some members bridge two or more Communities of Practice and serve as brokers, creating partnerships and translating experience from one Community to another. There are boundary activities that can take place between Communities that serve short and long term functions. Again, in a time where many faith communities have turned inward, boundary practices such as dialog, mutual work, and shared learning could help us look outward. The simple act of curiosity, which always happens on the boundaries, can help communities engage the world around them.

Legitimate peripheral participation is an important aspect of Communities of Practice as it speaks to how they legitimize the participation of people who are on the periphery of the Community. This may be a new member, an occasional member, or a member permanently on the periphery. By giving legitimacy to the individual, the

Community allows a person to meaningfully engage in the joint enterprise, even though the individual is not a full member. This encourages a dynamic give and take with new people, allows for the in-flow of new ideas and perspectives, and opens the whole Community to the transformation inherent in the introduction of new members.

Trajectories of Participation

Individuals can participate in Communities of Practice in a variety of ways, and these can be seen as trajectories. *Peripheral* trajectories never lead to full participation, but allow a kind of access to a Community and its practice, which can shape one's identity. *Inbound* trajectories are descriptive of newcomers to the Community who have the intent of full participation and are invested in the Community even as their participation is deepening. *Insider* trajectories describe individuals who have achieved full membership, but who are undergoing constant change due to their participation in the dynamic life of a Community of Practice. *Outbound* trajectories are descriptive of those who are in a process of moving out of full membership in the Community. Congregations have people demonstrating all of these trajectories, but rarely strategize how to make each of these trajectories occasions to make the individual and the Community stronger.

The Multigenerational Aspect of Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice not only have members in a whole range of trajectories, but also have *multiple generations* at work simultaneously. One cannot make generalizations about older and newer generations because it is a complex set of relationships that can be mutually enriching. On a whole spectrum of possible pasts, presents and futures, members engage with one another and experience the unique

perspectives, histories and hopes that old and new bring into this mutual engagement. Perhaps this sense of mutuality is what has been missing as the church has lost its younger generations. Somehow, the inherent opportunities present when generations are in community together are often forgotten.¹³

Communities of Practice and Belonging

Communities of Practice invite individuals to belong in multiple ways. On one level, membership comes about through *intentional engagement*: a person steps into the Community, assumes a trajectory of participation and joins in the work of the enterprise. On another level, one “belongs” to a Community through the *imaginative adoption* of a new identity and purpose. A person will say, “I am a follower of Jesus” and begin to imagine and experience a very real new identity. This new identity is developed and reinforced through the joint enterprise of a community of faith. A third way one belongs to a Community of Practice is through *alignment*, or an intentional commitment to shared purpose and mission. A brief categorization of these three forms of belonging to a Community of Practice looks like this:

1. The work of *engagement*:
 - Engaging around a common sense of mission (a common sense of enterprise)
 - Joining with each other to mutually benefit
 - Finding the like-experienced or like-minded
 - Engaging around skills and abilities
 - Joining with each other as companions, partners and friends
 - Interacting trajectories as mentors/mentees, masters/students, old timers and new timers

¹³ My friend and fellow Lutheran and cohort member, Rich Melheim, has made a significant critique of the Sunday School movement in the United States as a detriment to the culture of congregations and a limiting factor to its missional reach. See his self-published work *Let's Kill Sunday School Before It Kills the Church*.

- Opening peripheries by reaching beyond perceived boundaries and barriers
- Managing boundaries by partnering with other Communities of Practice

2. The work of *imagination*:

- Being empathetic and aware of the need and opportunity that compels one to act or join
- Seeing a trajectory of participation that goes into the future and believing that there is a path to greater meaning and significance
- Sharing stories, metaphors and narratives as a way to find one's story as part of a larger story and/or wanting to be a part of a compelling story
- Relating to distant practices as a way to deepen experience beyond the normal or at-hand
- Assuming the meaningfulness of foreign artifacts and actions and engaging through a resonance with the story of an "other" culture.
- Transferring meaning through the act of reification or creating models, patterns and representational artifacts
- Reinterpreting histories and trajectories in new terms by engaging in the exciting work of taking the old and translating it into something new and life-giving
- Imaging possible futures by engaging through working towards a preferred future
- Creating alternative scenarios of doing and working by engaging through the co-creative process of making something in new ways for new contexts

3. The work of *alignment*:

- Investing energy in a directed way
- Finding beauty and possibility in the midst of diversity and difference by negotiating perspectives and finding common ground
- Using of power and authority to leverage the work of a Community for a higher good
- Convincing, inspiring, and uniting in common vision casting to inspire a Community to act and learn together
- Creating a narrative of identity and helping a Community come together around to share the new identity.
- Devising artifacts, such as teachings, behaviors and traditions that are portable to other Communities of Practice.
- Creating boundary practices to align by exploring the edges of the Community of Practice, inviting others in and finding opportunities to engage with other Communities of Practice
- Reconciling diverging perspectives, finding alignment through the hard work of reconciliation, listening and valuing others

Engagement, imagination, and alignment are the primary methods of belonging by which individuals connect with a Community of Practice, even if they are not explicitly called for in the organizational structure of the organization.

Designing Congregations as Communities of Practice

Three things are true about designing Communities of Practice. First, finding the balance between structure and freedom is an exercise in minimalism. Second, the practice that flows from it will be determined by those engaged in the enterprise, which will make every Community of Practice unique and highly contextual. As Dr. Len Sweet is fond of saying, every church should be an artisanal community. By adopting an understanding as a Community of Practice, this is a likely outcome. Third, the Community of Practice will have an emergent character. The key is for the design to allow participation and generate energy to sustain the Community it forms. The absolute focus is in the practice, and the structure must be in the service of the practice, not the other way around. Design has to provide just enough institutionalization to keep the enterprise together, but not so much that it has a limiting effect on the Community.

Design of such Communities does not dominate, but rather it is transparent and gentle, flexible to the emergent character of the Community. A unique feature of designing such Communities is the idea that the diversity of opinion and style is both preferable and a creative advantage. Participants in Communities of Practice are motivated by meaningful engagement in work that positively contributes to their negotiation of meaning and shaping of their identity, as they contribute to shaping the Communities that define them.

Conclusion

The emergence of a culture of participation, with its insistence on participation, collaboration and creativity, challenges our current experience of congregational life. Congregational structure, habits, self-understanding and leadership tasks will need to adapt in order to respond to the changing culture. One must then consider how communities of faith can organize in such a way as to be seen as a place where people can collaborate, create and express themselves as individuals, supported by a community.

Congregations may likely consist of more than a single Community of Practice. For larger, more complex congregations, it may be more fitting to imagine and design them to be a constellation of multiple Communities of Practice. As will be explored more fully in the next chapter, the adoption of a self-understanding of congregation as a constellation of Communities of Practice offers a way into a more vibrant future for the church. Congregations will have a connection with people who have learned that they can find meaning in a high degree of participation, creativity and collaboration. People will find it deeply satisfying to gain legitimate participation in the mission and ministry of the congregation.

Congregation as a Community of Practice will allow the congregation to manifest its identity as the people of God in emergent, adaptable, and relevant ways. In a culture that features an increased speed of change, it will help congregations become more nimble and responsive to changing challenges, needs and opportunities. In making this change, congregations will be challenged to adopt new ways of imagining life together. For example, congregations will be asked to allow legitimate participation by all

individuals in the Community. Instead of being a change-resistant organization, the local congregation will need to be highly invested in change, creativity, experimentation and diversity of opinion, belief and expression. Consequently, leadership tasks will also change. Leaders will be asked to create environments, and identify and equip leaders, teams and groups. Mentors will need to rise up, boundaries relaxed and behaviors changed.

So far this work has discussed the nature of innovation, collaboration and design, as they have expressed themselves in our current culture. Institutions that have been the most innovative in their fields, and those that thrive on collaboration were also examined for some ideas to help form tools, mindsets and habits for congregations to use in their new identity as Communities of Practice. Social media and the organizations that it has created give us deeper clues as to the practical implications of a more connected world and the rise of a culture of participation. Cognitive surplus¹⁴ provides insight on the vast untapped creative potential of people, even the people currently in faith communities. In the next chapter, a deeper dive into the idea of collaboration will provide some signposts that can help in the design of these Communities of Practice.

In so many ways, the advent of a culture of participation has brought about a new day. It can also be a new day for the church and for the local congregation. Instead of dying, the church can thrive once again, vibrant and effective in its mission. To do so, the church will need to join the cultural shift towards innovation, collaboration and design. Thus, the next will explore the series of questions posed in Chapter Four to demonstrate how the Communities of Practice model can be adapted as a construct for the local

¹⁴ Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin Press, 2012).

congregation's self-understanding. Communities of Practice will be paired with the habits of innovative organizations to create a model for being a healthy faith community in the midst of a culture of participation.

Formative Scriptures

What follows now is a brief survey of a handful of Scriptures that serve as foundation for the theological claims of chapter two, but also serve as insight around the choice of communities of practice as a fitting organizational structure for congregations.

1. Matthew 28:18-20:

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

This command and commissioning by Jesus to “go and make disciples” has guided the mission and identity of the church since the first disciples were sent by Jesus to live it out. The act of “teaching them...” was first demonstrated by Jesus in community. In the close-knit fellowship of the twelve, around the table, in villages, sea-sides and mountaintops, Jesus taught in the midst of community. He would speak, listen, respond and act most often in community, where the disciples (students) would respond, interacting with one another and Jesus. Jesus shaped his disciples as a community and used them to model

community. Jesus established community for the sake of learning, as the vehicle to shape the way that the disciples ‘did life’, and for forming meaning. By using community as a discipleship making strategy, Jesus provided a theological basis for social learning theory. Social learning theory claims that people learn from interacting with each other. This insight shows the genius of Jesus’ adopting the familiar role of ‘Rabbi’ and calling his disciples/students/followers into community. Even the risen Jesus interacted with the disciples often in community. This sense of disciple-making as social learning was also modeled in the first century home churches, and the evangelism of Paul. Faith was shared in community and disciples were ‘made’ in face-to-face encounters and the ‘knowing’ of the faith came through daily life with the saints.

2. Romans 12:1–2

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The sense of faith being a ‘whole-body’ experience, a living sacrifice, requires a living out of faith in daily life. Faith is not only an intellectual knowing, it is also and always embodied. Just as God was embodied in the person of Jesus in order to have faith ‘in flesh’, we are also asked to embody our faith in our daily life. This makes ministry an exercise for everyone, not merely clergy or those set

apart. This scripture becomes foundational for the theological idea of ‘the Priesthood of all Believers’ and the reason that every person can claim a calling.

3. Romans 13:8

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

One of the most compelling ideas of Luther and his concept of ‘vocation’ is that the object of our callings is always and only our neighbor. By extension, our vocation is an expression of love for our neighbor, and it is the vehicle by which we live out the Great Commandment to love they neighbor. Len Sweet gifted the world with the concept of W.E.I.R.D – Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Developed. Through this concept, he held that in the context of being ‘WEIRD’, we have often made faith a set of intellectual propositions. Luther would counter this by reminding us that love is the motivation and the substance of our vocation, and that our neighbor is the object of that love. Paul’s words in Romans 13 remind us that this has always been the case. Before Paul, Jesus claimed that the love of neighbor and love of God are the substance of faithfulness.

4. 1 Corinthians 7:17

“However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches.”

One of the claims of this paper is that every person has a unique calling in this life. A calling that we are gifted for, and a calling that leads us to serve our neighbors. My pastoral experience has informed me that this is also the secret to a meaningful, joyful life. When a person identifies their unique calling in life and applies their giftedness and passion to that calling, life finds depth and meaning. When we ‘lead the life that the Lord has assigned’ we, like the very first Jesus-followers are living in the Way of Jesus, joined with Jesus in God’s work in the world.

5. 1 Corinthians 9:19

“For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.”

Luther, as was noted in chapter two, began to link the idea of ‘freedom from’ with the idea of ‘freedom for’. We are free *from* the consequence of sin, and its bondage, so that we might embrace a freedom *for* the sake of our neighbor. This again provides a basis and an urgency to call people into using their freedom from sin to live for the sake of love of neighbor. The freedom from sin is not intended for us to then live a life apart from or indifferent to the needs of our neighbor, but it is meant to propel us toward our neighbors and their needs, so that love might be made real. In loving our neighbor, the law is fulfilled, and our lives are joined to Jesus and his mission. Joining our sacred lives with Jesus’ sacred mission of love for God’s beloved creation is our highest calling and deepest identity.

6. 1 Corinthians 12

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit... Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many...

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

This is the Biblical basis for understanding congregations as constellations of communities of practice. Each person is a unique creation, uniquely gifted for mission. Communities of faith are a single body, where every part, every person, is needed to make the whole. One might also see that every community of faith is uniquely gifted and called, and that the church is a body that needs every community of faith to be whole. Communities of practice embody these principles. Every person is unique and needed. The community needs all of its parts in order to be whole. To then organize a community in such a way that everyone claims their unique identity and role is faithful to this image of the church. To see the interdependence of every group and team within the community is also faithful to this image of ‘many members, one body’.

This is also a great point of connection with the culture we presently find ourselves in. A culture immersed in the desire to connect, to collaborate and create is primed to respond to organizational structures that recognize the unique contribution of every member of the community and promotes easy and meaningful collaboration. It might be found to be true that a congregation organized as a constellation of communities of practice is a very faithful way to live out God's intention that communities of faith understand themselves to be 'one body with many members'.

7. Galatians 2:20

"...It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

As we live into our giftedness and our identity as beloved children of God, and as we use our vocation to love our neighbor, we experience more fully the reality that 'Christ lives in me'. To embrace our identity as beloved children of God is to become ever more Christ-like. We find the Christ in us reaching out in love to our neighbor, offering love and grace to the world. Faith is embodied in our daily life, and expressed in our vocations.

8. Galatians 5:6

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

‘Faith working through love’ is again the basis for calling and vocation. Although our reformation heritage reminds us that salvation does not come to us through our actions, we are reminded that it is faith working through love that matters most to our neighbor. Again, faith that is not embodied is not yet faith expressed. The symbolic acts (like circumcision) we often substitute for love are not, in the end, worth anything, unless that they are accompanied by acts of love for our neighbor. Love is the motivation for our vocational callings to serve our neighbor. Love is the substance of our vocation and love is the reward for our vocations.

The Scriptural basis for using the organizational structure of communities of practice as a response to the culture we find ourselves in is clear. Rooted in the discipleship making work of Jesus, the forms of the first century church and reflected in the metaphors used by Paul is the implicit claim that learning (discipleship making) is primarily a social activity. Scripture supports the claim that we are each given callings in life, and through these callings we find our vocations and we use our vocations to serve/love our neighbors. The work of the Spirit animates our unique giftedness as individuals as well as binds us together as one body. This allows us to imagine congregational organization that honors and calls out the giftedness of each person. Empowered by the Spirit to follow Jesus’ command to love our neighbor, each person can identify their vocations and live faithfully, serving their neighbor and glorifying God.

Communities of practice are organic, responsive and adaptive. Much like the body metaphor used by Paul, communities of practice value each member and

knit the members together in powerful ways to become one body. Each member playing its part, making a valuable and needed contribution to the whole.

Communities of practice depend upon mentors, teachers, guides and teams, much like the disciples and the early church. People learn the Way of Jesus together, modeling the faith, supporting one another and following the lead of the Spirit.

Much more embodied, much more vibrant as an organization than the church we have inherited with dead structures of committees and top-down authorities that tend to ignore the giftedness and callings of the majority of the people. Jesus clearly came to call people into community, and into a new way of living.

Congregations organized as communities of practice can be a faithful interpretation of that call.

CHAPTER SIX:
DESIGNING CONGREGATIONS AS A CONSTELLATION OF COMMUNITIES OF
PRACTICE

Culture changes. Every era, century and decade, “age” and empire brings cultural change. Every new media brings change. We live in the midst of the change brought about by Web 2.0 and the rising culture of participation. Technological advancements have made it possible for people to connect with one another in revolutionary new ways. As they have connected, they have found new ways to express themselves and create and collaborate. The Web gives everyone with access the chance to have a voice, find a community, and make something new. This has led to profound changes in the way people experience the world as it is mediated through this new technology.

Current culture is also one of experience. Marketers, brand managers and corporations are sophisticated in the way they wrap product in narrative, backstory and experience. Audiences have consequently become actors as people crave interaction and experience. And the experiences they have are of high quality and impact.

In contrast, the church has, by and large, retained an organizational culture and structure that is hierarchical and passive rather than participative, causing the church to suffer in the midst of these broader cultural changes. At a time when other organizations are using structure to invite new generations to connect, collaborate and innovate, the church remains stuck in top-down structures and mindsets that protect the organizational habits of a previous age. To invite people who live and work in environments that value participation, encourage collaboration and depend on organizational design to drive

innovation into the life of the local congregation simply will not work unless the structure and mindset change.

Unlike the time of the Reformation when Martin Luther led a technological revolution via the printing press (at one time, 80% of all printed material in Germany was content generated by Luther), the church has barely participated in the development of the Web 2.0 culture, leaving the church and congregations on the sidelines as bystanders. Even worse, churches are now largely technologically and culturally illiterate. People, craving new ways to receive information, connect, and participate, have found the church to be of an age now past, and struggle to see the church as a place that knows how to engage and interact with them. We have seen an entire generation leave the church because of the revolutionary culture shift brought on by Web 2.0 and the emerging culture of participation.

In my thirty years of ministry, the church has seen its self-understanding shift. Mid-century, the church was a constituent part of the social fabric, maintaining a place in the public square; and it was mainstream. As settled member of the culture, the church had arrived. Change was resisted, and at best, seen as needing to advance only in small increments. As the culture changed over the past 20 years, the church did not adjust its self-perception, and thought it could rest in this comfortable place. Then, the rapid technological change brought on by Web 2.0 also brought with it significant changes to organizations with regard to innovation. The pace, scale and audaciousness of innovation exponentially quickened. Organizations that resisted change struggled and failed while those that embraced rapid and significant innovation caught a wave and have ridden it to a brand new day. Other organizations that did not even exist twenty years ago now stand

on the top of the corporate giants of today, birthed through the innovation fueled by Web 2.0.

The arrival of the experience economy has left the experiences offered by the church (in form, if not in substance) wanting. The church has not adopted the mindset and tools of innovation, now widespread in US-American culture. Local congregations have been pushed to the margin of the public square. Dwindling in numbers and relevancy, they struggle to connect, and are seen as relics of a bygone era, incapable of innovating to take advantage of the moment.

In Chapter 2, this author rummaged around the theological attic of Lutheranism to find some remnant DNA and insight to help the church. Important, and, at the time, revolutionary insights of Lutheranism need to be lifted up and examined in the context of these challenges. There is hope there. Our identity as a reforming church, a movement that is not stuck in time or place, is crucial and offers life to a dying church. We have a heritage of being self-critical, and we have long stated that every generation can, and must reform the church anew. This part of our heritage is a reminder that God is not finished with us. It is also a call to look anew at the state of our neighbor and adjust continually to the new needs that arise as time passes and cultures change. The Lutheran concept of vocation, that every person has a calling(s) to live out, speaks well into this culture's desire to connect, create and make a difference in the world. The biblical idea that every person is a unique design—and the corollary, that every congregation is a one-of-a-kind artisanal expression¹—again resonates with a culture that is embracing of diversity, equity and the ability of every person to make a unique contribution in their

¹ Thank you, Dr. Len Sweet, for this perfect phrase.

neighborhood, work and community. As people of faith, we affirm that the roots of creativity come from our creative God, and that we are invited to co-create with God. It should not be difficult for the local congregation to be a place that affirms the cultural desire to create, innovate and make a difference in the world.

Previously, the social learning construct of Communities of Practice has been lifted up as a possible model for how congregations can see themselves. Communities of Practice help people make meaning, experience community and learn. Participatory by definition, they invite collaboration, honoring people's unique design and desire to make unique contributions in the world. Congregation as a Community of Practice is a great vehicle for a culture of innovation, and allows for adaptation and change. Designed properly, congregation, as Community of Practice, will have many of the same characteristics of the first century church, where the Way of Jesus was lived, taught and expressed. Communities of Practice can carry the reification of the best of the tradition, while allowing hierarchical, static organizational design to be put aside. A congregation, designed as Community of Practice, can be a welcoming place for peripheral participation, and allow a generation averse to joining institutions to find a legitimate place within the life and mission of a congregation.

These cultural shifts have also brought us a new day of innovation. Innovative organizations and leaders provide great examples, habits and tools to learn from. Inspiration, ideation and implementation, the three spaces of innovation, are concepts that congregations can explore and adopt. The culture of innovation has birthed the discipline of Design Thinking, a way of driving innovation in any institution, including the local congregation. The marvelous point of connection here is that Design Thinking invites

people to participate, perfectly matching the current cultural moment. Design Thinking is also people-centered and requires empathy. For congregations that have had difficulty looking outside themselves, Design Thinking offers tools and a new mindset that will force them to observe and honor the people with whom they wish to connect.

A convergence exists here between problem and solution. The problem is how the church, as local congregation, can connect with people in the midst of the culture of participation and Web 2.0. Lutheran theological heritage serves as a reminder that there is a need to respond to this problem. The concept of congregation as a Community of Practice is an organizational concept that a congregation can adopt to help change the structure and culture of a congregation to respond to this new day. The tools of Design Thinking can help congregations and their leaders create processes that will lead to innovation and new ways to faithfully connect with people and live out their mission.

The Congregation as a Constellation of Communities of Practice

“Though our experience of knowing is individual, knowledge is not.”²

You can find Communities of Practice in very unlikely institutions and organizations. An especially unusual setting for Communities of Practice is the World Bank in Washington, D.C. The atrium of the World Bank in Washington, D.C., is a vast and stately space of glass, steel, and concrete. The architectural grandeur befits a major financial institution—no sign anywhere of a knowledge initiative. But if you happen to visit on the day of a “knowledge fair,” you will see something quite different. Between

² Etienne Wenger, Richard A. McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2010), 10.

pillars, you will find booths run by the Ban's Communities of Practice. What these booths display are not financial spreadsheets, but information about the community's knowledge of development issues and the projects they are pursuing: biodiversity, information systems in agriculture, gender in rural development, inequality and socioeconomic performance, and land policy and administration. The brouhaha of animated conversations with visitors adds a buzz to the decorum of the place.³

In terms of definitions, there are several types of Communities that we could imagine. Communities of Interest are people who meet around a shared passion. For example, people interested in film or certain languages might participate in a Meetup group. Communities of Place are those people who have a connection through the area in which they live. For example, people meet through a residents' association or a local Web forum, Communities of Action gather around a cause or specific event such as objecting to a cities' building plans. Finally, Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they regularly interact.⁴ For the purposes of this dissertation, congregations are imaged as congregations as Communities of Practice.

A house church may be seen as a Community of Practice. Some small congregations may also be a single Community of Practice, while most congregations, especially larger ones, would be more of a constellation of Communities of Practice. Different Communities, organized around different aspects of following in the Way of Jesus and the articulated mission of the congregation. People gathered around common

³ Ibid., 187.

⁴ Emily Webber, *Building Successful Communities of Practice: Discover How Learning Together Makes Better Organizations* (London, UK: Drew London, 2016).

passions or needs, sharing their work, learning together and mentoring one another. These communities share a larger, ‘nesting’ vision, with their purpose nested within. They perhaps share a building, some staff and a budget, and together these Communities of Practice form a constellation of groups and teams that live out the congregations’ mission.

Designing Communities of Practice

As we begin to conceive of congregations as constellations of Communities of Practice, we need to change mindset before structure. Structure is a bit easier: gone are all standing committees and organizational charts. A formal leadership needs to remain, including the pastor(s), staff and lay leadership, in whatever form is required to hold and articulate the congregation’s mission. In Lutheran congregations, this is the church council. All other congregational activity is to be imagined and carried out by groups and teams that come into being through the establishment of Communities of Practice as formed by engagement, imagination and alignment, as described in the previous chapter.

Leadership is responsible for creating an environment that encourages and nurtures the formation of these Communities of Practice using the following guiding principles:

1. Design for evolution and be minimal in the initial design of these communities. Know that they will evolve over time, and that their purpose and work will become clearer over time, changing as the members of the Community grow and change.
2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives. Make sure that the conventional wisdom is met with new and varied perspectives, and work hard

to give the new perspectives legitimacy. Establish community values that promote imagination, experiments and listening.

3. Invite different levels of legitimate participation (core, active, and peripheral), recognizing that not every member of each Community of Practice will enter or maintain the same level of participation. As groups get better at inviting people desiring differing levels of participation, they will become more open, inviting, creative and healthy.
4. Support the Communities with information, resources (people, money and communication) and attention.
5. Identify and train leaders of each Community of Practice.
6. Coach and support the leaders of each Community and network them together over time so they can learn and support one another.
7. Help each Community of Practice develop a covenant that articulates its purpose, values, methods of support for one another, and a work plan, if necessary.
8. Celebrate the unique style of each Community of Practice and use the diversity of the Communities towards creative advantage.
9. Create an environment where it is safe to fail as failure is the only way to learn.

Communities of Practice within the congregation will continue to gather for common worship and other activities as needed. There may be many individuals who belong to more than one Community of Practice at a time. These diverse Communities of Practice are a constellation – they do fit together in a sky of common mission. They may

share a budget, a building and a staff – but they carry on their individual work as a Community of Practice in their own unique ways.

The Developmental Stages of Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice are organic, in a sense since they develop over time. Communities of Practice experience five stages of development: potential, forming, maturing, self-sustaining and transformation. In the *potential stage*, the Communities imagine their common work or life together and discover their strengths and abilities. It is a loose network with shallow roots. During this stage, they need a high level of coaching and input from the congregation's leadership. In the *forming stage*, the Community incubates, going deeper into its purpose, and forming its habits. The members of the Community begin to experience connections and new relationships and invest more energy into the work and life of the Community. The level of coaching and input from leadership lessens. In the *maturing stage*, the Community is focused and expands. They increase in membership, commitment is high and they have common experiences to draw from. They have developed habits and rituals, and are good at welcoming and onboarding new people. There is a high degree of trust. Input and coaching is steady, but less needed. When the Community is in the *self-sustaining stage*, it is at its peak. There is momentum, and high commitment of the members, with leadership that is shared and able to transition well among leaders. Often, leadership is shared. Members are now experienced and there is a robust system of internal mentoring and development. Other Communities of Practice look to these self-sustaining Communities for healthy habits and advice. Input and coaching needs are low. In the *transformation stage* of the Community, it begins to end its life together. This happens after some event, a significant leave-taking or a

diminishment of the need for the Community to exist. The members gradually let go of the Community and take their leave. Input and coaching from the leadership of the congregation is necessary to help with a graceful, positive ending.⁵

Leadership, membership, practice and support can be further examined during each of the five stages of Community development.

1. The *Potential Stage*

a. Leadership

- i. Someone has identified, needs and wants to create the Community.
- ii. Leaders have time to dedicate to forming the Community.
- iii. Leaders have an initial vision and/or goals for the Community.

b. Membership

- i. There is an initial criteria for membership.
- ii. There is an initial list of potential members.
- iii. There is a recruiting strategy for members.

c. Practice

- i. A need for a practice has been identified that is not being met.
- ii. A certain practice has no additional capacity to grow.

d. Support

- i. There is some organizational support for the Community.
- ii. Visibility is only among those that have been told about it.

2. The *Forming Stage*

a. Leadership

⁵ Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder.

- i. Leaders are engaging and motivating members to take part.
 - ii. Leaders are setting initial standards for what “good” looks like.
 - iii. Leaders begin to come from outside of the Community.
 - b. Membership
 - i. Members meet regularly.
 - ii. Members understand the criteria/expectations of membership.
 - iii. Members have developed and signed a covenant.
 - iv. Members are building trust and sharing needs.
 - c. Practices
 - i. Members are growing deeper in practice/activity.
 - ii. Members are reaching for higher goals.
 - iii. The practice is evolving.
 - d. Support
 - i. There is some visibility that a Community is forming.
 - ii. There is an increase in participation and energy among members.
 - iii. Members are making the Community a priority of time, energy, and resources.
- 3. *The Maturing Stage*
 - a. Leadership
 - i. Leadership is now shared among a core group; roles and responsibilities are understood.
 - ii. The Community has a clear vision and has set goals that are in alignment with its vision.

- iii. Members are able to influence the Community direction and activities.
 - b. Membership
 - i. Membership has grown beyond the initial network.
 - ii. There is legitimate peripheral participation.
 - iii. There are members with inbound and outbound trajectories.
 - iv. Creates and promotes activities with people outside the Community.
 - v. Members are deeply satisfied with participation.
 - vi. The environment is safe and nurtures deep relationships.
 - c. Practice
 - i. Members learn from one another and have the tools to do so.
 - ii. New practices/activities are developed and shared outside the Community of Practice with other Communities.
 - iii. The Community is good at problem-solving.
 - iv. The group accesses outside resources as desired.
 - d. Support
 - i. The Community and its outputs are very visible to the organization.
4. *The Self-sustaining Stage*
- a. Leadership
 - i. Leadership responsibilities are distributed throughout the Community.

- ii. Leadership transitions are anticipated and planned for.
 - iii. The Community's vision and goals are regularly updated.
 - b. Membership
 - i. The Community of Practice is a part of the members' regular life.
 - ii. The Community is good at recruiting new members.
 - iii. The Community can measure success and tell their story.
 - iv. The Community has an effective on boarding of new members.
 - c. Practice
 - i. The wider organization values the practice of the Community, and it is integrated into the life of the whole congregation.
 - ii. Members help other Communities of Practice as they start up.
 - iii. The Community has explicit and tacit knowledge.
 - d. Support
 - i. The Community is an established part of the larger community.
 - ii. People outside the Community support and advocate for it.
- 5. *The Transformation Stage*
 - a. Leadership
 - i. Leaders are aware that outside dynamics have limited the Community of Practice to the extent that it will no longer evolve or continue.
 - ii. The internal need for the practice is no longer present.
 - b. Members
 - i. There has been significant leave-taking.

c. Practice

- i. The mission of the group no longer meets a need that is felt or needed.
- ii. The mission of the larger organization no longer holds the mission for this specific practice.

d. Support

- i. The leadership helps the Community of faith transition.
- ii. Members of the transitioning Community of Practice are invited into other Communities of Practice.

What makes Communities of Practice an effective model for congregations is that at the heart of calling together people into intentional community is the desire to help people live in the Way of Jesus: a disciple life. Originally, the call was to become followers of Jesus, not to create or sustain a church. The church is now in need of renewing this identity to be a community of people who want to live in the Way. As people engage in Communities of Practice, they are joining others in the common enterprise of doing life together and discovering how to live in the Way of Jesus. Each Community of Practice will have its own way of doing this, but it is the community aspect of this that is the magic. Learning is a social activity, and by joining others in common mission, individuals can observe and learn from one another how to live in the Way of Jesus.

For the pastor, in particular, this means that she/he is no longer the prime actor, no longer the answer to every question, nor the energy for every desired action. Instead, the pastor helps set, nurture and articulate the vision. She/he identifies leaders and people

looking to engage around a common purpose, or imagine a new way to do ministry, or to align with others to make a greater impact in the world. The pastor coaches, encourages and supports the Communities of Practice, and he and others tend to the constellation of Communities of Practice that make up the congregation. The pastor becomes good at creating and maintaining a culture that supports the diverse and unique Communities of Practice that have just enough in common to share a building, a budget and a staff. She becomes good at celebrating the work and life of the Communities and helps them birth, thrive and end their life.

The pastor and the congregational leadership also become good at design and help create the innovation culture of the congregation. Innovation drives the Communities and helps the congregation continue to meet the needs of its neighbors in new and varied ways.

Design Thinking as a Ministry Tool

“Design Thinking is essentially a human-centered innovation process that emphasizes observation, collaboration, fast learning, visualization of ideas, rapid concept prototyping....”⁶

“Design is about making intent real.
There is plenty of unintentional to go around.
When you design, something new is brought into the world with purpose.”⁷

The case for finding new ways to design ministry is simple: the old models are not working. Technology has profoundly changed the ways people connect with each

⁶ Thomas Lockwood, ed., *Design Thinking: Integrating Innovation, Customer Experience, and Brand Value* (New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2010), 44–45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

other, with organizations and causes, the way they create, and the way they collaborate. The expectations of experience are higher than ever. People expect better, more sophisticated experiences and greater customization.⁸ They are looking for interactions that enhance their lives, and they do not believe that they will find such experiences and interactions in the church. The irony and the missed opportunities with this generation are great. The church offers the greatest life-enhancing, life-changing experience one can have. The church has the longest history of authentic, transformational community in the world. We have the goods—the Spirit of God, the table of Jesus, the amazing grace of the Gospel, the life-giving identity of baptism—but we stand unable to connect these gifts of life and transformation with the people all around us. We need to throw off the organizational structures, habits and mindsets that have led us to this place and find new ways of inviting people into share the goodness of living in the Way of Jesus.

Corporate America may be an unlikely place to go looking for a way toward a new future for the church, but it holds at least one tool that to use that offers promise: Design Thinking relies on collaboration, creativity and participation, which makes it resonate with the current culture of participation. Design Thinking is becoming pervasive in the most innovative and transformational companies. Thomas Lockwood says, “Whatever the sector or the nature of the business, any organization can benefit from the practice of business design.” Design Thinking is useful for non-profits and service industries as well as traditional for-profit enterprises. It has become so prevalent because

⁸ With regard to experience: “Consumers are expecting more as they value their own entitlements more than previous generations. Where once people accepted what they got, market economies have trained individuals to expect more. This is accentuated when leading brands create excellent experiences that lead consumers to think, ‘Why can’t all my experiences be like that? Service providers that were one size fits all, and you get what you are given, have to rethink their approach as customer expectations grow,’” in Ben Reason, Lavrans L  vlie, and Melvin Brand Flu. *Service Design for Business: A Practical Guide to Optimizing the Customer Experience* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2016).

“It taps into team intelligence, creativity, and ambition to make a meaningful impact in the customer’s life, both functionally and emotionally.” One can imagine how this resonates with the current culture of participation and experience. He continues, “Embedding these methods and mindsets into strategic planning practices helps an organization to identify opportunities to capitalize on new and unmet needs, explore possibilities outside its current activity system, and set strategies to evolve the business model toward a new level of competitive advantage.”⁹

It is easy to see how the church is in need of a tool that would help it “explore possibilities outside its current activity system.” Even if the church has no need for “competitive advantage,” most would readily acknowledge that we need what Design Thinking offers: a way to draw out the creative potential of our people.

I remember being taught decades ago that the people of the congregation were our greatest asset. As I have come to serve, love and know thousands of people over the years, it has become clear that outside of the grace of God, they are still our greatest assets. Especially today, people are creative, talented and accomplished. They live and work in a connected world. They collaborate at work and in their communities to accomplish amazing things. Yet, we have not harnessed the creative potential of our people for mission. Many have not been invited to create ministry, or collaborate to deliver mission or belong to a Community of Practice. Design Thinking is a way to invite people into an exciting process of mindfulness, collaboration, imagination, risk-taking, learning and bringing forth new ways of doing ministry and making a difference in the

⁹ Lockwood, 44.

world; and to live out their callings, use their unique giftedness and find the joy of being a part of a community of people joined in common purpose.

To build a culture of innovation in the local congregation requires much of the same mindset as it does to reframe the congregation as a constellation of Communities of Practice. To become a design-oriented congregation requires leaders and pastors to adopt several characteristics:

1. Mindfulness, or a bias towards observation and empathy, to watch real people interact in real time;
2. Openness that creates collaboration that gives every person a voice;
3. Creativity, to imagine possibilities that are beyond what is immediately observable;
4. Gracefulness that grants permission to fail and the belief that failure is not just acceptable, but necessary for learning;
5. Curiosity that values of experiments and prototypes to build new experiences and ways of doing ministry;
6. Determination that insists on autopsies on experiments, with honesty and good humor;
7. Discipline that shoots bullets before cannonballs, requiring small experiments first and, as you perfect what you are trying to accomplish, scale it up; and
8. Maturity that creates an organic approach to ministry and mission that is normalized in addition to well-managed change.

Once adopted, these characteristics help create and sustain a culture of design and innovation. There are many obstacles that lie in organizations that are resistant to design.

They can squeeze the life out of any attempt to build a new design culture. Instead of a culture built on control, fear of risk, cost-cutting, long-time horizon committee approvals and “we have never done it that way” thinking, one must set about building an entirely new culture.

There are three aspects of Design Thinking that interact with one another. The first is empathy and deep understanding of people and how they actually behave. The second is the ability to imagine, ideate, prototype and evaluate; and then do it again. The third is to design ministry strategically, based on the results of listening, experimenting, evaluating and designing. These three aspects feed into one another, and without all three, the design process is less than desired and will not produce high level results.

Design Thinking starts off with a brief, meaning a description of a problem or opportunity that needs to be addressed. At this point, it pays to take time to make sure that what is being labeled a problem is not merely a symptom. The old habit of “asking why five times” will get to the depth of the issue and identify a root cause. After a brief is articulated, then the empathetic phase of Design Thinking begins. It is designed to gain insight into the behaviors and motivations of “customers” through careful observation, interviews and analysis. The team assigned to this particular brief then begins the work of imagination, a discovery process to find patterns and connections to get closer to people’s needs and desires. Next, the ideation phase happens, where the team begins to create conceptual ways to capture their findings and imagine possible responses and solutions. Imagine storyboards, narratives and prototypes. During this phase “customers” can be invited in to have input on the narratives and proposed solutions. Solutions are tested, evaluated and new solutions are created or refined. The final phase begins once a possible

solution has shown promise, and now a new process, service or product can be rolled out and scaled up.

There is wisdom underneath this process. The design approach is human centered. It is empathetic, and it concerns itself primarily with what people are imagining, doing, feeling and gaining from experiences. A process of imagination, ideation and implementation, it is thinking by doing. However, Design Thinking draws on insights instead of numbers, seeking to understand behavior and then using insights to drive change. Many of the practitioners of Design Thinking rely on story-telling and narrative development, often a visual storytelling. To tell a story, mapping a journey or creating a narrative helps people understand complex situations, communicate ideas and more fully describe experiences. Design Thinking also “pulls” ideas instead of “pushing” ideas, trying to find solutions that already reside in or are suggested by people’s behavior. They do not wish to have to “sell” someone on a solution, which rarely works. It is why consumers, clients and end users are often used in the design process itself.

Design Thinking is a process that seeks change that matters, not change for the sake of change. Even some of the most hard-nosed corporations have realized that they are about the business of providing solutions for people’s real lives. As they have employed Design Thinking, they have invested themselves in helping people improve their lives, enhance their experience and connect with their brand on a relational level. If that can happen when a company sells a computer, designs footwear, or delivers food, then surely congregations, which value the human experience and wish to help every person enjoy the life worthy of a beloved child of God, would desire to do the same. We have more to offer than product, entertainment, or any other consumer-related good or

service. Imagine how the church could connect with people if we learn how to design experiences and community in a way that resonates with the children of this new culture.

To put a finer point on Design Thinking as it relates to congregations, it is important to look at Design Thinking as it has been applied to service. An aspect of this work has been named “customer mapping.” It is a way to think about a customer’s journey with an enterprise. In relationship to a congregation, it is an exercise that asks you to map out the movement of people through their interaction with the congregation. An important aspect of this work is the acknowledgement that the “customer journey” has a before, beginning, during and after.¹⁰ This is something congregations are not in the habit of thinking about. It acknowledges that people’s experience begins before they engage with the congregation. Increasingly, people come with an ever-wider set of possible histories regarding their relationship with the church, Christianity or faith in general. In mapping a customer journey, the design team would consider a person’s history:

- Before: Where do they come from? What experiences, bias, prejudices, and knowledge do they bring?
- Beginning: What is the start of the relationship, which will set the tone for the relationship, and may end the relationship if not attended to well?
- During: What kind of interaction and experience are they having? Are they gaining a sense of welcome and experience they were hoping for? Are we able to exceed their expectations?

¹⁰ Ben Reason, Lavrans Lovlie, and Melvin Brand Flu, *Service Design for Business: A Practical Guide to Optimizing the Customer Experience* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2016), 23.

- After: What do they do next? What do we prefer that they do next, and what can we do to influence what they do next?

After studying Design Thinking for service businesses, it is clear that most congregations lack any intentionality about the interaction they have with people, especially newcomers. Nor do they have a rigorous process to track the journey of multiple types of people to evaluate the quality of the interactions or experiences people gain when they come in contact with the congregation whether it online, in worship, or in outreach and service. The rigor of mapping “customer” journeys and then using Design Thinking to respond to the learning from that would help congregations engage, connect and build relationships with people much more efficiently. Customer journeys describe how to deliver the right experience to each individual person. They provide an understanding of real people in real time and can enable the congregation to design for different types of people.

A Plan

The congregation I serve is large, youthful and has a heart to serve its community. Somehow, it has accomplished this despite a decade-long churn of pastoral leadership that began with the removal of the senior pastor for infidelity. A number of short term interims, a failed senior pastorate that ended with a heart attack and retirement, and a four-month senior pastorate (just to name a few of the highlights) led to a congregation without a tremendous amount of structure or history of innovation. A successful three-year interim brought some stability, and then I was called. I was called to fill out the staff, re-focus the mission and develop leadership. The staffing changes have been positively

received; there is tangible increase in vibrancy and an increase in momentum; there is growth in worship numbers, children and youth ministry; and giving is on the rise.

The next steps of congregational development include using the concept of congregation as a constellation of Communities of Practice. The committee structure is long gone, and in its place are emerging groups and teams that are self-directed and operate on covenants as outlined above. Every group and team is coached by a member of the leadership team, and the church council remains in charge of the mission and the allocation of resources to support the groups and teams. We will soon begin to use the language of Communities of Practice to guide the work of our groups (primarily learning and life groups) and teams (primarily service and mission focused). We are working on a training and coaching plan for our Community leaders, and we are looking to develop ways to help them network with one another. Loose boundaries are encouraged, so people can engage in legitimate peripheral participation, and training to build awareness of inbound and outbound trajectories, mentors, guides and novices and the way learning is transmitted within the Communities of Practice. We are helping the Communities of Practice to understand that they are wrapped up in the bigger mission of helping people practice life lived in the Way of Jesus, and that they need to be mindful of how the work and practice of their group helps individuals grow as followers of Jesus.

Design Thinking will be a new aspect of our life and ministry. There are three projects that I will use to introduce the concept of Design Thinking to the congregation. The first is about building design and how it affects people's experience of welcome and hospitality. We are a congregation that embraces and welcomes people of all walks of life, races and sexual orientation. The people of the congregation embody that welcome

well. Our building does not. Shepherd of the Lake is housed in a very contemporary 12-year-old building that is now in need of some work, particularly as to how it promotes welcome and hospitality, as well as how it tells our story. We will use Design Thinking as we engage with our architect, practicing the three phases of Design Thinking—imagination, ideation and implementation—to help bring new solutions to how we engage people with our facility to build community.

The second place we will introduce Design Thinking is with regard to our leader-guides of our confirmation program. We have over 600 students in our Wednesday evening ministry to and with middle school students. They are all engaged in small groups, led by one or two adults. Those leader-guides are not building community with each other, sharing resources or mentoring and supporting one another. I would like to take a small group of leader-guides and take them through a Design Thinking workshop to imagine new ways they can resource one another and build a better experience for them as leaders.

Lastly, we will use Design Thinking to imagine new ways we can resource our adult members as they go about their busy lives. Many of our couples are two-career couples, and they lead busy lives. Their children are typical suburban children who are (over) programed and scheduled. Parents spend hours in the car, at practices and events for their children. They are affluent enough to have a cabin and so they travel extensively. We need to understand how we can best resource their faith in the midst of a schedule that finds them less frequently attending church events. Using the empathetic practice of Design Thinking, inviting our “customers” to help imagine, design, and test possible solutions will be a fun and rewarding experience.

I am grateful for the learning that this Doctoral program has brought to me. The learning was needed, and has been stimulating. The cohort was fabulous, and the instructors inspiring. At this point in my career, beginning my most challenging call, it was a stimulus to my inspiration, my faith and my imagination. I have become a much different leader through all of this. I look forward to experimenting with this constellation of Communities of Practice, and to use the tools of Design Thinking to help this congregation solve its most persistent challenges and become a center of innovation in mission and ministry.

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