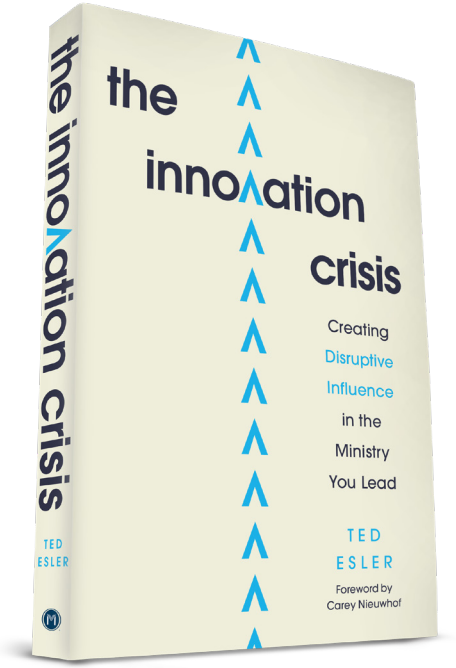

In *The Innovation Crisis*, Ted Esler shows you how to innovate in ways that change the ministry landscape. You'll discover the four stages of organizational culture—disrupting, innovating, sustaining, and stagnating—and gain strategies for staying in the innovation sweet spot. Because if you aren't innovating, stagnation isn't far away.

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A CRISIS OF INNOVATION

"Expect great things; attempt great things."[1]
William Carey, shoemaker

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.
Mark 2:21–22

WHERE ARE THE INNOVATORS?

"Ted, who in the church today do you feel is doing something uniquely innovative and effective?"

I was speaking with a major church leader. He should have been the one telling me who the innovators are. I paused, stuttered, and then honestly replied, "I will have to think about that and get back to you."

"That's what I thought," he replied. "I see so little innovation among church leaders that I wonder what our future holds."

Little did this leader know that in a few short months, the world would be turned upside down by something called COVID-19. The

rapid and almost total change that many of us in ministry would face was unthinkable in January 2020. By March, one of the core activities of the church, gathering, was essentially outlawed. Pastors stared into cameras instead of faces as auditoriums remained empty for months. Even one-on-one meetings became something done over software. Fear rose about a future drop-off in giving (a fear that did not materialize for most ministries). A two-week lockdown turned into months of lockdown. Businesses were shuttered while others prospered. The whole world was different.

Innovating is touted as a means of creating a preferred future. During the COVID-19 pandemic, change occurred at such a fast rate that few could keep up with the present, let alone worry about the future. Innovation was the need of the hour. The vast riches of the Internet were viable resources for deeper teaching, story-telling, and relationship building. The best most churches could do was film the traditional service for online viewing. The pandemic highlighted a lack of imagination and creativity.

The pandemic highlighted in stark terms the groaning in the church today for innovators. There was a time not long ago when the muscular megachurch movement seemed poised to provide us with ideas that would propel us into a better future. Scandals, politics, and ambition appear to have put this hope to rest. Missionary agencies and Christian nonprofit organizations also suffer from a lack of innovation. They feel old, antiquated, and small in a world of massive technology-driven megacorporations. While the church struggles to innovate, we watch lithe and capable businesses start in garages as side gigs. They innovate, grow, and dominate our lives and the stock market. Meanwhile, we in ministry leadership struggle to find the funding, people, and ideas to drive discipleship deep into the hearts of people.

Innovation is the use of something new to create solutions. It can include invention, the creation of something new, or it can be a mixing of existing things to create something new. It might be technological,

but it is not limited to technology. It is about products, services, processes, and ideas. Innovation is most often focused on problem-solving but, as we shall see, sows the seeds of its own destruction by introducing its own problems.

How we think about innovation itself has changed. Innovation was once discussed only by business wizards and engineers. Today, innovation is expected to change the very nature of an industry, product, or service. Entrepreneurs pitch "paradigm shifts" all the time, in every sector. Ministry leaders, bound by tradition and facing a most uncertain future, are questing for a new era of innovation. We feel the spirit of innovation all around us in industry yet struggle to see how it can be brought to bear in ministry.

If you think this is an exaggeration, discuss innovation and the church with a business leader. What you will find, after the pleasantries, is a harsh assessment about a lack of creativity and innovation by ministries of all kinds. I suppose one might argue that the application of good business management in the church is innovative. That sort of innovation is not the expectation any longer. Now we are looking for creative ideas that move ministries in far more meaningful ways. Thus, while innovation has lagged, expectations have grown.

The network that I lead, Missio Nexus, presents an award for innovation each year. Associations give awards because they highlight the values that they want to see embodied in the membership. Our board decided that we would give a Lifetime of Service Award, highlighting faithful, lifelong service in the Great Commission. The other award was for innovation. We appeal to our membership, some thirty-thousand mission leaders, church leaders, staff, and missionaries, to provide us with nominees for these two awards.

Giving away the Lifetime of Service Award is one of the highlights of my year. The recipients are well-known Christian leaders who have influenced a generation or more of Great Commission ministry. I tell them they have no more than three minutes to talk to the audience, and

I still must work to get them to "land the plane," as they thank us and offer advice. It is a joyous time.

The innovation award is another story. Some years we struggle to give it because *no ministry is nominated for being innovative*. I often email, then call, then berate our members for suggestions. Sometimes, we compromise and give it for "excellence in ministry"—a sure sign that innovation is lagging. When we do have a recipient, it is also a time for joy. Yet there is something unfortunate when it is easy to celebrate the heroes of a past generation while we struggle to find contemporary examples of innovative ministries.

The unmet expectations I see in the ministry I lead is a symptom of a larger disease in the broader church. The bigger proof that we lack innovation is the failure of the church to capture the imagination and heart of the culture. We must consider our lack of imagination in creating the post-Christian world that we are now experiencing. We have lost our voice in culture. What we offer is not attractive to a society that has moved past our paradigms. We might be wearing skinny jeans to church, but that sort of window dressing is part of the problem. The world is looking for something new and different. If we want to regain that voice, we must innovate.

Jesus the Innovator

Contrast this to the ministry of Jesus and the first century church. Innovation fills the pages of the New Testament. We have the *new* covenant because it ushers in the fulfillment of the old covenant while introducing the kingdom of God. Each time Jesus opened His mouth, it was as likely as not that some innovative new way of understanding the world was about to be revealed. You want to be first? Be last. Rich people? Much harder for them to get into heaven. You want to throw a stone? Sure, if you are pure in heart, go for it. Jesus inaugurated a kingdom unlike any before or since. It needed *new* wineskins because

the old could not contain it. Jesus gives a *new* commandment in John 13 ("that you love one another: just as I have loved you"). His followers struggled to keep up.

At one point His disciples chided Him for saying things that were hard to hear (cf. John 6:60). Why were His teachings so hard? Because they revealed a new way of seeing truth that had not been considered before. The cross, though explained and foretold by Jesus and the prophets, took His followers by surprise. In Matthew16:21 we read, "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." What could be clearer? Then, when it happens, they scatter, unable to remember that He was coming back to life. It was paradigm busting. To quote an old movie, the idea was so preposterous that they couldn't "handle the truth."[2] Even *after* Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were still asking about its fulfilment in a political sense, not the much more expansive realm of the heart (cf. Acts 1:6).

The early church was also highly innovative. The inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom was almost a bridge too far for the primarily Jewish early church. Considering Jewish history and the contents of the Old Testament, it is understandable. Jews were instructed not to mix it up with Gentiles. How then, in a relatively short span of a few chapters in Acts, do we find the broad embrace of the Gentiles into the church? Like any innovation, detractors to this concept lasted for years (read Galatians for evidence of this). These are all jaw-dropping innovations embedded in the core of New Testament Christianity.

The history of the church is an innovation history. When a plague hit the Roman Empire in AD 165, under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, estimates are that between 25 to 30 percent of the Roman population died.[3] To put that on a contemporary scale, that would be like a novel coronavirus killing anywhere from a billion to one and a half billion of the world's population today. That dwarves the COVID-19 pandemic.

The best guess we have is that the plague was smallpox.

Infected people were pushed out into the street to die. Who was there to serve? Christians, who even though they were under heavy persecution, risked their lives for the gospel. At a time when anybody who could leave Rome did, Christians stayed and served the sick and dying. Do you doubt this was innovation? Imagine how the pagan priests looked on, in shocked dismay that the Christians were gaining the upper hand in the culture. Perhaps they later asked, *Why didn't we think of that?* as the Empire's hatred for Christ faded.

Think of the innovations that Christianity introduced to the world:

- Christianity had a major influence on ending child abandonment, infanticide, abortion, and the sale of children as slaves and prostitutes.
- Modern medicine owes its beginning to hospital systems launched by Christians. This stretches back to third and fourth century. I recently drove by South Florida Baptist Hospital, reminding me of a time when health care and Christianity were inextricably linked.[4]
- Contrary to popular belief, science was supported by Catholic church leaders and members. Scientists such as Galileo were funded by church leaders.
- Natural rights extended the Greek view of democracy, creating universal civil rights. This is a direct result of Christian innovation in understanding basic human identity.
- The modern university was born from Christian education.

Since the Reformation (itself an innovation), I can think of only one globally influential innovation project that Christians have founded. That would be the global missionary movement. Over the past few hundred years, most innovation has been in the domain of industry.

Where Is Our Innovation?

If innovation is so much at the heart of the New Testament narrative, why do we see so little of it today? Perhaps one reason is our view of doctrine. Foundational truths are immovable. The gospel message itself is not up for further innovation. The work of the cross has been completed. We cannot innovate more grace into the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. We will never write additional books for the New Testament canon. Yet, there is great room for innovation in loving others, communicating the gospel, celebrating His glory, fulfilling the Great Commission, taking care of widows and orphans, and working for justice and just about every other goal ministry leaders might consider.

The church produces weekly services like a factory. Unfortunately, they are numbingly the same from week to week and church to church. At times it appears to me that we are no better than McDonald's at delivering the exact same thing everywhere. We even export our way of doing church globally when cultural difference invites diversity in form.

We are besieged by a poverty of imagination.

As the leader of a missionary association, I am sometimes asked why, after two thousand years, the Great Commission goes unfulfilled. From a human vantage point, I have concluded that a lack of creativity and risk-taking by God's people are at the core of this failure. We are besieged by a poverty of imagination.

I understand the overwhelming pressure that leaders face to be creative risk-takers. The typical ministry leader feels the strong current of innovation and change all around them. Yet our churches and organizations are more like the rocks and trees in the river as the floodwaters rise. We cling to them, hoping not to be swept up in the direction this river of change is taking us. What if we could direct this current instead of simply being washed along with it? What if the people we lead could let

go of the rocks and branches and freely swim in the river of innovation?

Not long ago, I corresponded with a leader about the need for innovation. A donor was asking how the ministry was innovating considering the challenges in the world today. This leader asked, "Whatever happened to faithful service? It doesn't seem like it's good enough anymore." This CEO, who leads a multimillion-dollar-a-year Christian ministry, is struggling under the pressure that comes when there is no innovation. He knows there is an expectation to innovate. Yet, it is about all he can do to simply keep the ministry he operates up and running. Leaders are being weighed in the balance of innovation expectation and find themselves lacking. I know this because I feel it myself.

We Need a Whole New System

One way that frustration about innovation is real involves the call for a "whole new system." Domestically, we are faced with stagnant and declining congregations. The largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, continues to see annual declines in membership going back to 2006.[5] Pew Research reports that close to 25 percent of people identify as religiously unaffiliated, an increase of 10 percent since 2007.[6]

On the global front, things appear to be healthier. While the Western church has stagnated, the "majority world" church has exploded. Yet, even in this story there are calls for radical change. We stand some two thousand years since Jesus gave the command to disciple all the nations. Vast cultures continue to exist with no churches, a lack of Scripture in a heart language, and no contextually appropriate gospel witness. The Joshua Project, perhaps the most cited source of information on the spread of the gospel globally, states that 42.5 percent of the world's people groups are unreached. This represents 3.23 billion people.[7] Some missiologists that I speak with believe that the world is becoming less reached despite reports that we are winning the globe.

Many missionaries raise support for their work. In fact, it is a growing trend for domestic church planters to also raise support. Missions pastors grow weary of repeated funding requests. They are frustrated that agencies have not come up with a new way to fund themselves apart from this model. Some see the system as racist, favoring rich, white congregations and discriminating against poor, minority churches. The missions pastor of one of America's largest churches told me, "I am sick and tired of this antiquated system of fundraising. When are we going to move past this and empower the church to be more involved? *We need a whole new system*."

Frustration is also a reason given for the "business as missions" (BAM) movement. They see the donor support system, in which churches and individuals pledge financially to give to missionaries, as unsustainable and antiquated. They view their solution, using business to fund cross-cultural workers, as a whole new system.

Consider book titles such as *When Helping Hurts* (a call for a new way to approach relief and development work), *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (a plea for academic rigor and thinking in evangelicalism), *Changing the Mind of Missions, Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (a new way to do global missions). These are all helpful calls for innovation, renewal, and reset in the spheres they address.

Leaders of the house church movement regularly write and speak about the need for "a whole new system." They decry the rapid growth of the megachurch, multisite churches, and online churches as diminishing community within the church. They often call for a new church that emphasizes discipleship instead of teaching as its primary contribution.

Look at the celebrity pastor role. I have yet to hear somebody argue that celebrity pastors are a good thing for the church. This model opens our congregations up to untold leadership dangers, from moral failures to financial greed. Yet, celebrity pastors write most of the books we read, speak at most of our conferences, and set the agenda for the church in

the United States, Canada, and beyond. Even though the average local church size hovers close to one hundred people in the US and Canada, we look to celebrity megachurch pastors for our leadership material. Innovation for these large churches will not translate to the environment in which most churches do ministry. Perhaps we do need a whole new system to select our influencers.

With the onslaught of COVID-19, I was hopeful that perhaps churches would birth new, innovative models of ministry. It was hard for me to watch the virtual church services that were rolled out. Most were mirror images of the in-person services that already feel stale. There were a couple of songs, some announcements and a prayer, another song, a sermon, and then a song. The same order of worship, delivery style, and teaching methods were employed. This is despite pastors now having the combined contributions of the Internet to bolster their messages, support their points, borrow from other teachers, map the biblical sites, and collaborate with online chat, video, and text. Yet, every virtual church gathering I watched reproduced the in-person sermon without any significant departure. I am certain that there were stellar examples contrary to this. I had hoped a *global* pandemic would create the sparks that would lead to an inferno of innovation.

If you are like me, you understand the yearning for something new. Something that adapts to emerging cultural realities, sometimes creating culture, while communicating the ancient truths of the Bible. In fact, this is part of the challenge before us. People are most attracted to new things when they resonate with their deeply held human desires, wants, and needs. Instead, we in the church are serving up leftovers. Much of our message and how we deliver that message was designed for modernity. We now live in a postmodern world.

We face a crisis of innovation.

Shoemaker

This book is an exploration of innovation that can be brought to bear on kingdom initiatives. I have decided to bring along an old friend on this journey, William Carey. Carey is somebody who has gone before us and shown us the way. His work kickstarted the global missionary movement. He is a prime example of an innovator.

Our world is so different than the one Carey lived in that it is difficult to grasp the extent of what he did. He was born into a stratified society where one rarely, if ever, switched vocations. He was apprenticed in England as a shoemaker at fourteen years old. For most English people of the day, that apprenticeship would mean a lifetime of being a shoemaker. But four years later, Carey would experience a new birth in Christ. He drew a map of the world and hung it above his work bench. Andrew Fuller described it as "a large homemade map of the whole world pasted together of several sheets with population, religion, and other facts about every country written on the map in Carey's own hand."[8] I can imagine him sitting there, cutting and stitching leather as he looked up at the map and prayed.

Carey borrowed a Greek grammar book and taught himself New Testament Greek. He married a woman of his own class, who was poor and illiterate. She gave birth to his first child, who died two years later (along the way, other children would die as well). All the while he preached the Word, although he was not known for being particularly eloquent. He was influenced by Jonathan Edwards' book, *An Account of the Life of the Late Rev. David Brainerd*. His mission zeal grew, and in 1786 during a meeting of his denomination's leadership, he pled with them to consider overseas missionary work as a priority. An old minister spoke up, saying, "Young man, sit down! You are an enthusiast. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he'll do it without consulting you or me."[9]

This sort of apathy about the Great Commission led Carey to write a booklet in 1792, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use*

Means for the Conversion of the Heathens. Was Carey the first to consider missions as a major paradigm for the church? Certainly not. His appeal, however, was innovative in its approach. He used statistics, a description of the world as it was in that day, and outrageously suggested that the Great Commission compelled Christians to act. He organized a missionary agency in this same year. Carey "understood the times" (cf. 1 Chron. 12:32) and instinctively knew that now was the time for Protestant missionary work to go forward.

British missionaries to India proceeded Carey by some one hundred years. But the conditions for travel, the growth of the pietist movement in England, the rise of new structures called missionary societies, and the publication of Carey's booklet galvanized a movement. He rode the wave that had been created for him while also introducing his own innovations along the way.

His most famous words were preached around this time in his life. In a sermon based on Isaiah 54:2–3, he said "Expect great things; attempt great things."[10] The forward-thinking visionary, a humble cobbler from England, would not simply preach these words. He would then live them. He left for India. Just the voyage was a riskier step than most of us are willing to take. More so because he did this in opposition to the East India Company's desire to keep missionaries out of India. Britain did not want their money-making and exploitation of India hindered by an enthusiast like Carey.

Space does not allow for a complete telling of the hardships Carey faced or of those faced by his family because of his decisions. Suffice it to say that India, in the 1790s, was not a comfortable place for a missionary to live. His ministry highlights adaptability, resilience, and creativity. He formed a team with other significant missionaries. The most notable are Joshua Marshman and William Ward. They had the first memorandum of understanding known in the missions world. Its principles continue to influence how modern missionaries conduct their work. This team had to disassociate itself from the British because of the East India Company's

influence. Carey, like modern-day travelers, needed a visa and a resident's permit. Because of the hostility of his own government toward him, he arranged this through the Danish to continue his work. Today, we call this sort of missionary a "creative access worker."

He translated the Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Hindi, Assamese, and Sanskrit and parts of it into other dialects and languages. These achievements, had nothing else been accomplished, place him in a small group of people in human history. Not content with just translating the Bible, Carey also sought to honor Indian culture. He translated classic Sanskrit into English, making it available to Indian scholars for the first time in centuries. This was radical.

Translations needed to be distributed to activate their gospel message. To make this possible, he founded a printing business and an indigo factory. He was doing business as mission before any of us attended a conference on how to do it. He started Sunday schools, originally created to teach literacy to the impoverished, for Indian children. His actions reveal the wide swath of projects he was willing to take on to meet his objectives.

He led the resistance to the practice of *sati,* widow-burning, earning additional ire form the British leaders but even more from Hindu leaders. Carey cataloged the number of women whose lives ended through this cruel practice. He publicized it and went so far as to accuse the British of being complicit in the crime. Sati was already against the law in the region where Carey worked, but lax enforcement meant that hundreds of women were killed each year. Today we might argue about the role of social justice in missionary endeavors. Carey had no qualms about facing down societal evil. In addition to opposing sati, he also critiqued the caste system to the ire of local authorities.

During all this activity, he evangelized, started schools, churches, and even a college to train young men to be Bible teachers. His first convert, Krishna Pal, came to faith after an injury to his arm led him to visit the Carey team. He learned not only about caring for his arm, but also the love of God and the effects of sin. Carey visited him in his home

and invited him back to his. Despite the incredible workload, William Carey was directly involved in the lives of the Indians.

This ministry was filled with disruptive innovation. At a time when the British Empire was draining India of its resources, Carey did quite the opposite. He not only shared the gospel message, he lifted Indian culture and blessed them in ways their own scholars did not. He was a flawed human being and made mistakes along the way. Yet, his legacy in India is impressive.

In addition to his Indian ministry, Carey unleashed a movement back home that continues to this day. We call him the father of the Modern Missions Movement because the church in the West rediscovered the Great Commission in part because of William Carey, who began his work out of his humble, shoemaking beginnings. Because of his work, hundreds of thousands of missionaries have set out in obedience to the call of the Great Commission. Carey exemplifies for us an understanding of the times, creativity, and risk-taking. He was an innovator who launched a movement.

Success Breeds Failure

Carey was mostly a founder. He started new things. Founders have freedoms that successive leaders do not have. Because most of us are working within ministry environments that have expectations, people, programs, and budgets, we often feel more like stewards than pioneers. But stewards can also be risk-takers. The parable of the talents reminds us of this truth. Leaders today must work toward aligning their vision with the work of the people within their churches and organizations. Institutionalization, the creation of policies, and managerial processes and bureaucracy all conspire against us leaders.

In Chris Zook and James Allen's book, *The Founder's Mentality*, they describe the "predictable crises of growth." Most of us do not consider growth to be crisis-inducing, but it is. In movement studies, researchers

say that the fastest way for a social movement to end is for that movement to be successful. For organizations, including churches and ministries, a similar concept is in play. Contrary to what we often hear, starting a new ministry may not be as hard as keeping an existing ministry from losing its primary mission and vision.

Starting a new ministry may not be as hard as keeping an existing ministry from losing its primary mission and vision.

I have heard people say, "Success breeds success." But a more accurate statement is "Success breeds failure." Success often leads to poor choices by leaders (they take on more than they can handle). Success sometimes becomes an impediment to risk-taking (leaders want to protect the gains that have been made). Success might lead to stagnation (when the status quo is all the leader and ministry know). Yes, success has many advantages. It beats failure hands down. But it also brings with it a set of problems, which, over time, can cause leaders to grow averse to innovation.

Leaders I have observed who are struggling with a lack of innovation are often sensing that past success is creating future failure. The ministry built to handle the growth that comes from success is typically focused on maintaining momentum. When momentum falters, the easiest thing to do is try to work harder. More effort is expended chasing smaller gains. Leaders, at least good ones, tire of this treadmill. This contributes to the desire for a whole new system and begs us to be innovators.

We also tend to train our entire ministry on what works. When something new comes along, people must be reoriented around whatever has been introduced. There are systemic reasons why this is a challenge. Take the ministry I lead as an example.

We produce lots of great online content for our members to use in their ministry. There are leadership materials, management items, courses, infographics, and plenty of other materials. We have built a

team around creating these resources. At a recent board meeting, our youngest board member listened to my report on how many times these resources were accessed. At the end of the presentation, she raised her hand and asked if she could comment. "Of course," I replied, "all input is welcome."

She noted that she is a member of the millennial generation and that they prefer to upload rather than download. "Huh?" I responded, the apparent misfire of our current strategy dawning on me. Millennials want to interact with the material and with others about the material. They want to be polled, asked about their view, discuss things, and be a part of the resource. Downloading it, without the social connection around it, is simply not something that Millennials are going to do.

That was great insight. It is why we have diverse viewpoints on the board. Once I got past outright rejection of her observation (the typical human response to opposition), I began to think about implementing it. Our staff is small and laser focused on producing content and programs that delight our members. Not one of them was hired to spend their time interacting online with our members. Our website has been designed around content curation and presentation. This is quite different than an interactive platform. We designed a beautiful one-way pipe. We had even turned off comments because it was a hassle to monitor them all the time. As I thought about it, our entire approach to social media had faltered. Why would we be successful in creating online engagement when the organization, the machine, was built to do something else? For us to change our paradigm, we would have to, well, *change our paradigm*. We are on that path, but it is a massive change for us and will take some time to fully implement.

Last year I spoke with a former CEO of a ministry that had created a form of media ministry that was highly influential across the African subcontinent for over eighty years. This ministry was so successful that it influenced the church in almost every African nation. It was low-cost, low-tech, and easy to reproduce. But digital media obliterated its

usefulness in the early 2000s. Attempts were made to upgrade the content for CDs and SD cards. Again, technology advanced. Digital media distribution on phones ended the need for physical media. Even in some of the most remote villages of Africa I have watched Bible studies in which all participants used their phones to hear teaching, interact over the material, and grow as disciples.

This ministry was built for physical media. When the CEO announced his plan to sell off the building and warehouse space, liquidate the inventory by throwing it away, and go fully online, the membership voted against the plan. They could not wrap their minds around a future in which there was no need for their facility. Instead of letting their CEO make the move to a new era, they doubled down on the old model because *they were built for it*. A few months later, COVID-19 hit, and ministry office spaces were vacated anyway. The building is now gone, along with most of the staff as the remaining few team members scramble to do what the CEO had suggested earlier.

Looking back, this all seems obvious. It rarely is obvious when the change is happening around you. Today's successful ministry strategy has rewarded us so that when threats come, the first thing we gravitate to is a doubling down on that strategy. The multisite church model of today will someday be the reason why leaders will not want to make changes to a newer church form. If you have ever been in an old, musty church building of a former era, smell that smell and remember it. That will be your church someday.

The better managed a ministry is, the less likely it will be able to innovate.

These dynamics are present in any ministry. They impact who you hire, how you organize the people, the way you choose to communicate, how much information you share, the kind of training you provide, how much line authority you give to staff, and so many other facets of organizational

life. Well-managed organizations create alignment around their prime objectives to deliver strong results. But this alignment becomes an impediment. There is an irony here. The better managed a ministry is, the less likely it will be able to innovate. There is an antidote, and we will get to that in chapter 7.

In the church, we tend to practice "success modeling." We copy the most successful churches, develop a lists of "best practices," and elevate to positions of authority those leaders whose ministry has had success. While there is inherent value in this, there is also a danger. Instead of creating new expressions of our ministries, we copy existing ministry practices. This results in homogenized approaches rather than rich and diverse expressions of faith. We will discuss "the stack" in chapter 3 and see that we can mix and match existing services, ideas, and approaches with experiments. This is not typical, though. We tend to be better at copying than creating.

Getting Off the Calf-Path

Ted Fletcher was the founder of Pioneers. Pioneers focused on starting churches where there are the fewest, if any, Christians. They have sent thousands of people on mission across the world. Ted used to call attention to our propensity to follow others by quoting a poem by Sam Walter Foss, "The Calf-Path." You can find it at the end of this chapter. The main point of the poem is that following others is our default setting. Ted was a highly successful *Wall Street Journal* businessman. On a trip to visit missionaries when his career was at its zenith, his heart broke over the many cultures where there was no gospel presence.

He began applying to missionary agencies and collected a stack of rejection letters. At forty, he was considered too old, with too many kids and not enough training or experience in ministry. Ted was overwhelmed by the lack of attention being paid to the "least reached" parts of the globe. He had to act. In 1979, he started a new missionary agency,

one that could not reject him. Today that missionary agency has over three thousand workers globally. Ted did not "stay on the calf-path," but rejected rejection. The missionary sending world has never been the same. When he founded Pioneers (originally called World Evangelical Outreach), few short-term teams would go to closed countries. Pioneers changed that. They also adopted a leaner, faster, and riskier approach to the training and sending of missionaries. Their explosive growth came out of Ted's own experience being denied as a worthwhile candidate.

Founders are unique people. They are the ones most likely to step off the calf-path and try something new. They are not bound by tradition or best practices. Because they are trailblazers, they tend to be misunderstood. Ted once told me how, when he proposed starting a new missionary agency focused on the hardest to reach places, people told him that there was "no need for another missionary agency." Those voices were partially correct. There was no need for an organization that did what the organizations were already doing. But there was a great need for a new, innovative organization that was willing to do ministry in ways the existing organizations were neglecting.

I sometimes ask church leaders if we need more ministry organizations. "No!" they immediately respond, almost in disgust. "We have plenty of organizations. We don't need any more of them." This reaction no doubt comes in part from the fundraising aimed at these leaders. Then I ask the same question, but in a different way. "What if we could empower the dreams of an army of creative, ministry entrepreneurs?" Then I get a completely different response.

Successful founders are entrepreneurs who are compelled to find expression for their vision. If that vision is one that the world needs, many of them create new organizations, start new churches, or creatively spur movements. We must encourage ministry entrepreneurs but we often, without realizing it, discourage them.

How many new churches does the world need? I think we need many, many more. I hope they are not carbon-copies of the ones we

have. These efforts are often where innovation thrives. I am not making the case that existing churches cannot innovate or be entrepreneurial. Far from it, as you shall read in the following pages. I am making the point that it is important to empower innovators.

We face problems scoped to our specific roles, teams, organizations and wider affiliations like schools and denominations. Beyond these challenges lie the giants. In the wake of the George Floyd killing the nation discussed *systemic* racism. Systems produce both problems and solutions. Consider issues like human trafficking, illiteracy, poverty and similar, large scale, intractable, historical problems. These are intractably difficult issues that are "the despair of tidy minds."[11] Solving them, or at least mitigating them substantially, would also change the world.

How many new and creative ministries are needed to reach the billions of people who do not know Christ? How can we as the church meet the challenges of feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and seeing a more just world come about? Who is addressing the lack of discipleship, sacrifice, biblical literacy, and other problems in the church itself? It is going to take millions of ministry entrepreneurs exercising creativity, innovation, and execution to influence the billions. We will have to step off the tried and true calf-paths to launch into this new territory.

The Eccliosystem

Biologists remind us that living organisms exist within larger systems they call ecosystems. Similarly, each of our ministries live within a broader "eccliosystem." I derive this from the Greek word for church, "ekklesia." The eccliosystem embodies not only the people who make up the kingdom of God, but also the various ways they have organized themselves. These diverse expressions of the church are today sharing with each other in ways they never have before. Seeing the whole, rather than just the part we play, is a key to conquering the big problems we face.

In writing this book, I struggled with the right way to frame the target

audience. There is much sloppy ecclesiology around the word church. It is like the word "love," which can refer to everything from "how much I like this chocolate" to sex. Context is everything. Innovation principles are applicable to a local church, a missionary agency, a Christian nonprofit organization, a loose network, or a range of other structures. There are also foundations, educational institutions (like Bible colleges and seminaries), NGOs, relief and development operations, and Christian health care institutions. There are formal associations, like the one I lead, Missio Nexus. These parts need to work together to accomplish the task that Christ set out to accomplish some two thousand years ago. Each has its own unique set of innovation challenges. Each of these ministries are but one small piece of the eccliosystem.

The eccliosystem is not disadvantaged in resources, people, money, or vision. The challenge of our day is that of creativity and imagination.

Added to that is the diversity of the local church itself. From large, expansive megachurches in world-class cities to small, home-led church networks in rural villages, there is little to generalize about who we are. Demographics, doctrine, and governing structures reveal distinctions so great it can only be the miracle of Christ that unifies us as the body of Christ.

The eccliosystem is not disadvantaged in resources, people, money, or vision. I believe the challenge of our day is that of creativity and imagination. What would it look like for this tapestry to be woven together with common goals and objectives? How could the diversity be unified as Christ called His followers to be?

The borders that hem in our creativity and imagination include the very structures that give form to the components of the eccliosystem. These structures are the people, rules, organizational culture, and other things that make up our organized ministry efforts. The stronger these

structures are, the more defined we make their missions and core value statements. The more success they seem to have within their niche, the harder it is for us to think bigger than they are. Innovation often happens across these artificial borders. These categories exist in our hearts and minds; they are rarely imbued with sacral blessing. We must think in terms of the larger systems. Do not interpret this to mean that both theology and relationship are not important. The kingdom requires both, and they are wonderfully interwoven into the eccliosystem.

Carey devoted an entire section to prayer in his treatise that launched the Protestant missions movement.[12] He wrote, "The most glorious works of grace that have ever taken place have been in answer to prayer." In addition to the resources within the eccliosystem, we can avail ourselves of spiritual blessings we have in God. Our innovation can be so much more than applying the principles of design and development from the tech industry, the best managerial practices of industry, or the combined knowledge of humanity as stored on the Internet.

One of the wonderful attributes of God is infiniteness. His love is not a scarce commodity that we must divvy up carefully in case the well runs dry. The genesis of the Great Commission is found in Genesis. The promise to Abraham is our continuing purpose: we are blessed to bless others. Borderless sharing within the eccliosystem is a boon to all. Can we see past our small goals and ambitions to bless each other, thus reaping the reward and promise of blessing ourselves? The payoff in solutions, particularly when focused on the big problems, could be significant. We will unpack examples of this in Bible translation, student ministry, city-wide transformation, and other arenas.

Can It Be Done?

We are surrounded by massive change spurred on by innovation. We expect innovation out of businesses. We look for it among medical

practitioners, educators, and the military. Even government is expected to innovate. A visit to the department of motor vehicles will most likely leave you asking, "Why can't they organize this better?" We expect more. There is an innovation expectation and ministry leaders are being judged on whether we can deliver on it. Can we rise to the occasion?

I believe we can, and in the pages of this book, you will find the major ways that innovation is being implemented today. You will learn about the tools and methods used from Silicon Valley to the Rift Valley that spur on innovation. You will be introduced to concepts like the stack, slicing, aggregating, design thinking, and wicked problems. In place of large-scale waterfall planning, you will be asked to consider the genius of incremental innovation. If we plan to create, innovate, and lead something *new*, it will require us to look past the best practices, successful models, and the type of "wins" we have already won. The new rules of innovation are not the same as the tried and true managerial leadership models we are well accustomed to implementing. Concepts like "change management" are helpful, but they are meant to help us manage, not innovate.

I am going to present to you five simple rules that innovative leaders utilize to solve problems. These are the Shoemaker Rules. They are simple, yet transformational. With William Carey, shoemaker and innovator as our inspiration, these five simple concepts can help you see how innovation in your ministry is possible. Each rule is stand-alone, but taken together, they form the basis for the ministry change that can drive a new generation of entrepreneurial ministry forward.

The Journey before Us

The first half of the book is focused on the problems and opportunities that we encounter as faith-filled innovators. The next five chapters are **The Shoemaker Rules**:

1. See a Problem Worth Solving
2. Ride the Wave of Existing Innovation
3. Be Biased to Action
4. Empathize, then Strategize
5. Think Big

In chapter 2, I'll cover the pitfalls of success and how it makes future innovation difficult. We will also take a dive into the Innovation Spectrum, and you can evaluate where your ministry might fall. Chapter 3 is about the new forms of innovation that are available to us in the twenty-first century. We will draw a distinction between invention and innovation. We will look at platforms, network effects, matchmaking, slicing and aggregating, and scale and crowdsourcing. Chapter 4 looks at the nature of innovation. There are myths and misunderstandings about who innovators are and where innovation tends to rise. In chapter 5, we will see how systems thinking, system design, and design thinking play a role in leveraging innovation. Ministry design thinking is laid out as a plausible way to take any problem and innovate solutions.

In the second half of the book, we will look at concrete "means" (to borrow Carey's word) by which we can put innovation into action. What can we innovate on, what does it mean to lead innovation, and what are the attributes of innovators? We will look at so-called "wicked problems" in chapter 6. These are the huge, complicated, and systematic issues mentioned earlier. Chapter 7 gives you a way to think about innovation targets. Ministry is different from business and we need a different set of standards in selecting problems. Then there are some ideas about innovative leadership in chapter 8. Leaders can create culture in a church, ministry, or other organization that is inherently innovative. We will delve into how they create an innovation culture, make decisions, view leadership, and empower teams. This is followed by a personal evaluation on how innovative you are in chapter 9. This section will focus on

personal application of what we have learned. We will end our journey with a summary challenge in chapter 10.

Warning

Innovation, and particularly digital innovation, has tremendous spiritual implications for good and for evil. The collateral damage of innovation can bring great damage to people's souls. The Internet, originally designed to help scientists share information, has opened the floodgates of a global pornography pandemic. Once those floodgates are opened, it is impossible to close them again. Innovation can be a force for good but is often a force for evil.

The pace of technological innovation has overwhelmed theological reflection about its implication on our lives. The pace of technological change has outstripped our time to reflect on its use. With the changes wrought by COVID-19, for example, virtual versions of church and fellowship replaced physical gatherings. It happened with almost no serious discussion about the ramifications to Christian community. And there are many.

For example, the model of Christ was incarnation. He did not present Himself as a disembodied representation of Himself nor as a burning bush, pillar of fire, or other symbolic form. He was physically present as a human. God became a man and dwelt among us. There is a reason that the church is called His body. Technology can now project presence without physical presence. Is there really such a thing as a "virtual church"? It may take years or decades for us to really see what the pros and cons of these massive shifts have been. Is this era a

We must consider the impact of technology on both the meaning of our message and us as created beings.

blip on the time line of our understanding of church or a watershed moment? We simply do not yet know.

The danger of what I call techno-paganism is real. Silicon Valley leaders like Ray Kurzweil and Peter Thiel are seeking to become immortal through technology. Elon Musk is building neural implants with the promise of "making the blind to see and the lame to walk." This trans-humanist[13] vision is redefining the way we will experience life. There is a rush to see who will be first to market, regardless of the consequences. We are ignoring the question of what *should* be done in favor of what *can* be done. As we talk about innovation and its partner, technology, we must consider the impact of technology on both the meaning of our message and us as created beings.

One way to do this is to avoid the trap that innovation is always technological. It often is and many of the examples in this book are technological. But ministry innovation can be about relationships, theology, personal discipleship, and similar, spiritually focused pursuits.

Another potential pitfall is to continuously chase after the latest thing. Innovation is not following trends. I have been doing work in global missions for many years now. Sometimes, when a new idea is introduced, old-timers like to say, "We've been through this before. It's just a trend that will pass." Sometimes this is true. Old-timers like me, however, are often first in line to critique an innovative ministry. So, while trend-chasing is not innovation, being set on "auto-critique" is not helpful.

A final warning is that, as Christians, we must recognize timeless truth that is not subject to innovation. We are not going to further enhance the gospel with innovation. We are not going to solve the problem of sin through innovation. Managerial practices will not replace biblical models of ministry. It is within the limits and framework of Scripture that we will find human flourishing. Innovation has an application for ministry but it is not the kingdom of God.

You, the Innovator

We started this chapter with a question: *Who are the innovators in the church today?* The best answer I can give is this—*you are*. Cartoonist Walt Kelly is credited with the phrase, "We have met the enemy and he is us."[14] If innovation is lacking in the eccliosystem, it is because we, its citizens, are not innovating. The crisis of innovation is not somebody else's problem.

One must not only innovate; one must *be* innovative.

I feel the frustration that others are expressing about how woefully inadequate our ministries are to create real innovation. If you are reading this book, I trust you sense that same crisis. Innovation always seems to be just beyond the horizon. Actress Marie Dressler once said, "You are only as good as your last picture."[15] She meant that people only remember your last contribution, not what you have done over a lifetime. Innovation feels a bit like this sometimes. Successes of the past are not sufficient for the current need. Thus, one must not only innovate; one must *be* innovative.

Nobody else is coming to save us from our lack of creativity and imagination. We are the cavalry. Let us mount up and ride in.

APPLICATION & DISCUSSION

Questions to Ponder

Here are some diagnostic questions to consider regarding innovation:

1. What do you see as the single most innovative ministry project in which you have personally participated?
2. What do you see as innovative in ministry today?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the statement: "There is a lack of innovation in the church today." Why do you feel that way?
4. Where do you think innovation intersects with theology?

TEAM EXERCISE & DISCUSSION

Homework:

Have each team member write a one-paragraph description of the biggest contribution your ministry has made to the eccliosystem since its founding.

Facilitated Discussion:

1. Ask each team member to read their paragraph and describe why they think it was the most important contribution.
2. Go around the room a second time, asking the team to discuss if the contribution stated continues to be the most important contribution.
3. Discuss how the ministry environment has changed since the founding of the ministry and what impact that has on the way the ministry currently serves its stakeholders.

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