

HOW TO TRY

Design Thinking
— and —
Church Innovation

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With much love I dedicate this book
to the person who each day makes me
a better priest, a better person, and a better Christian,
to my husband Troy.

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Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were being cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Collect for the Ordination of a Priest
Book of Common Prayer, page 528

INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO TRYTANK

Two weeks after the United States declared a national emergency over the COVID-19 outbreak, no one really knew much. The predictions were all over the place, and none of them were good. At one point, the White House mentioned that the number of dead in this country would be around 250,000, and that was on the optimistic side. The pessimistic number was more than a million. It is simply hard to try and wrap your mind around a quarter of a million people or more dying from anything. On the nightly news were the stories of the individual lives that made up such a number.

Embedded in those stories was the fact that because this disease was so contagious, family members could not be with their loved ones when they died. The sheer number of deaths meant that usually over-worked hospital chaplains were simply unable to cover it all. What we were hearing was profoundly disturbing to the soul: people were dying alone, and there was nobody there to pray with them at the end.

On March 24, the Episcopal News Service carried a story about the Rev. Peter Walsh, rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in New Canaan, Connecticut. It turns out that Father Walsh was prevented from being at the bedside of two dying parishioners, and so he administered the sacrament¹ to them by telephone. It was a necessity of the moment and, for the dying person and their family, small comfort in a very difficult time.

1. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward grace, for example, baptism and Eucharist.

But little did I know that the seed had been planted.

A few days later during a Monday staff Zoom call, we were discussing how terrible this all was, and how helpless we in the church felt. A colleague made a passing comment to the effect of, “I wish we could mobilize more priests to be there at this time, but we can’t even be there in person.” And in my mind, it clicked.

The TryTank process usually begins with a question: “What if?” In this case, it was, “What if we created a national phone number that any hospital could call to get access to a priest any time, day or night?” And, since local clergy are overwhelmed trying to create their own digital churches from scratch, what if we mobilized retired clergy to help out in this ministry?

The following week, just seven days from that insight, we found the technology to do it, put out a call for volunteers, trained them, and began to get the word out about a new ministry, Dial-A-Priest. While the name “Dial-A-Priest” may seem flip or even crass, the goal was to find a name that someone could remember enough to Google it. The thinking is that while they may not be able to remember the phone number, if they remember the name, they could get to it. Within days we were on the news. From the *New York Times* to my local newspaper in Palm Springs, California, to the NBC station in Washington, DC, there was interest in this new way of doing something old. The number of volunteer clergy also swelled from the one hundred we needed to almost two hundred names filling out a wait list.

As the new ministry was getting off the ground, we made discoveries and adjustments: the disease was hitting nursing homes hard and they generally don’t have chaplains; could we expand to offer them care? Since at the end of life patients were mostly intubated and unable to speak, could we offer pastoral care to the family members as well? And what about pastoral care to the hospital staff that was depleted by fighting a virus that in many cases they simply could not beat? We did all of that. We also bought ads on Facebook aimed specifically at nurses and doctors in hotspot areas. The calls were coming in.

But it was not the deluge of calls you'd expect compared to the need, so we investigated what might be happening. It turns out that for those for whom last rites matter a lot, it also matters who is giving them. Also, many hospitals were not willing to share a number they had not heard about before or vetted. What if it was some crazy outfit and the "priest" on the phone would say this whole thing was a punishment from God for their sins? In other words, where there was the most need, they could not (usually by policy) use Dial-A-Priest. As the pandemic raged on, not as many people were dying at the same moment, so existing chaplains and pastoral care givers were able to support the need.

By the time we closed the line down at the end of May, we had taken 243 calls totaling 13 hours, 45 minutes, and 30 seconds. While some calls were longer, most were about 3–4 minutes in length. And to those who called, pastoral care was provided.

Was this experiment a failure? If the measure is only that we wanted to help people at the time of death, then it was not a failure. Not perhaps as many as we had anticipated, but we did. We also proved that the church can go pretty quickly from idea to reality. Most significantly, we discovered the combined thousands of years of experience that's available from our retired clergy.

What you may not have noticed as I just recounted that story is that it followed a now-familiar path: a framework for trying things. Insights led to ideas that were then tried. It's not rocket science. It's three steps and creating a mindset that allows for these kinds of experiments to happen. And those steps can be taught.

That's what this book is about.

Innovation in the Church

Whenever I tell people that I run a laboratory for church growth and innovation they generally give me a funny look that says "I realize all the words you were saying are in English but I'm not sure they make sense in the order in which you just said them." Let's face it, the church

is not known for being the most innovative institution out there. We are the stewards of a tradition that's two thousand years old. Even so, innovation in the church has and continues to happen.

At a recent gathering in New York, I was having a conversation about my work with the former archbishop of Canterbury, the Honorable Most Rev. Rowan Williams. We were discussing innovation and the church when at one point he looked very excited as he proclaimed, "The Nicene Creed was an innovation in the church and *that* was in the fourth century!" When Martin Luther wrote the *Deutsche Messe*, "The German Mass," in 1526, he was aiming to make it more accessible to churchgoers since most of them didn't speak Latin. It was also the introduction of tuneful and accessible hymns: more innovation. Even when Anglicanism proclaimed a "middle way" between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant reforms, that, too, can be seen as innovation.

Innovation in the church isn't ancient history. It happens quite regularly at many churches. Every time someone in ministry asks, "What if . . . ?" they are setting themselves up to innovate. That is what innovation is, a new way of doing something.

Even Jesus talks about innovation. Sure, he didn't give a viral TED Talk, but he was very clear that we should explore new ways of doing things:

Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter told them, "I'm going fishing."

They said, "We'll go with you." They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus.

Jesus called to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?"

They answered him, "No."

He said, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.”

So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn’t haul in the net. (John 21:1–6 CEB)

I have often wondered if maybe Nathaniel had said, “Hey, why don’t we try the right side?” and Peter responded, “No, we fish from the left side.” “But why?” Nathaniel would ask. And Peter would give the answer every church member has heard throughout time, “Because we’ve always done it that way.” It took the son of God to get that to change.

Jesus’s invitation is still very much the same for us today. Not getting more people in church? Something’s not working out the way you want? Then try the other side. Do something different. Innovate.

TryTank

TryTank is a joint venture between Virginia Theological Seminary and the General Theological Seminary. When the deans of both seminaries and I were dreaming up how to best help the church of the future, they knew they needed something new. We all had conversations about what the future might hold and how the church could prepare. At one point, we thought about a place that could come up with ideas to share with the church, as a way of advancing the conversation, something similar to a think tank. We needed a place that could come up with ideas but that could also try them out. So, something more like a . . . TryTank, a place to think, explore, innovate, and to try. And they asked me to lead it.

While I really (really!) wanted to do this, part of me was afraid. What if the expectations were too much? Toward the end of the meetings about the lab and my running it, I asked both Ian Markham, the dean of VTS, and Kurt Dunkle, the dean of GTS, how we would measure success. “How will we know in a few years if we succeeded?” I was afraid that they would say something like “Well, because we saved the

church,” or “We will have found a silver bullet.” As much as I wanted this exciting new job, there was no way I was going to try to do *that*. Instead, their answers were perfect for the task: “We will be successful if we failed more often than we succeeded with our experiments,” said one. The other added, “Because we will have tried hundreds of things.” Fail often and just keep trying? I was *in*.

In January 2019, TryTank was launched. Since then, we have run or are in the process of doing over sixty experiments. We’re failing at a 50 percent rate (which, according to one of my bosses, shows we’re not pushing the envelope far enough). We have birthed two ongoing ministries that have now found new homes, and our work is just beginning.

We think of TryTank as a “proof of concept” lab. It’s a place where we can ask “What if?” a lot. We also have conversations with others who themselves are asking those questions and just wanted to know they weren’t crazy.

As I mentioned earlier, innovation is not a totally new thing in the church. But generally, these are the steps that one would take to innovate in the church.

1. Think of an idea; pray about it.
2. Form a committee and hold listening sessions.
3. Write a paper and go to a conference.
4. Do theological reflection.
5. Hear about how it was already tried in 1912.
6. Bring it to the vestry.
7. Since they said “No” the first time, bring it to the vestry again.
8. Try it.

This framework is how you end up with a MySpace² page in 2021.

In order to do this work in a way that makes sense, we developed a framework for how to try things. By developed, I mean that we looked

2. MySpace.com was a precursor to Facebook that was all the rage until Facebook came along and then completely killed them.

around at the many ways that the business world tries new things and we adapted one that worked well in our context. Our framework needed to be simple and nimble. It had to be quick and very organic. We looked at how the great consulting firm McKinsey & Co. does their work. We also considered the scientific method (being a lab and all). But they didn't fit. And we kept looking until one fit just right. We landed on design thinking with some adaptations for the church. (Don't worry that you don't know what design thinking is; we'll cover that shortly.) In the end, I think our framework is exactly all those things we needed and wanted.

In chapter 1, we'll look at design thinking as the framework we use. In chapter 2, we will cover how to put together a team to do this. In chapters 3–5, we will go through each of the three steps. In chapter 6, we will look at failure and those times you will want to walk away from this work, and why you should not. Finally, chapter 7 is about how to use this book as the guide for a congregation leadership retreat. Along the way, I will share with you some of our field notes, the stories of some the experiments that have worked and some that have not.

God at the Center

Before we get to all of that, there is one last point to cover here. While this work is exciting and fun, and we're learning from business and other disciplines, it is very important to remember that this work is about—and for—God. Ours is a God of creation who is always inviting us into new ways of being. Every step of the way should begin with a moment, spoken or not, when you and your team remember that this is holy work. Invite the Holy Spirit to be with you and guide you, and to open your hearts and minds.

It is my prayer that you will try many things and that in trying you will encounter the Holy Spirit who leads us and empowers us to do this work. May God bless you in it.