CHAPTER
1

Agility and Innovation

The word "agile" means "marked by a ready ability to move with a quick and easy grace."[1] Other definitions include "nimble," "adaptable," "flexible," "responsive," and "alert."[2] The root comes from the Latin verb *agere*, to act. It suggests agency, participation, dynamism. Many organizations today are recognizing the need for greater flexibility and responsiveness in the face of the accelerated pace of change that characterizes the twenty-first-century world. This means paying more attention to those outside the organization and watching carefully what is going on in the culture. It means listening to audiences and learning from them. It means being willing to adapt existing structures and patterns. It means clarifying who we are and what we are here for.

What would it look like for churches to embrace agility today? To attend prayerfully both to God and to a changing world? To adapt their lives in response to deep listening and relationships with those who are not part of them? To move with quick and easy grace, to be led by God in a dance? To identify and carry forward what is most life-giving and true, and to leave behind the baggage that gets in the way? Innovation and agility are in fact

nothing new for Christian disciples. They are integral to God's mission as described in Scripture, and they characterize many of the most vital moments of witness and service in the church's history. The long era of establishment for the church in Western societies rendered these dimensions of the church's life peripheral. Now is the time to reclaim them, which means revisiting the tradition in conversation with the realities of a shifting, pluralist culture and in dialogue with some of the best thinking on innovation from other organizations that know how to thrive in an agile world.

Contrasting Cultures

I grew up the son of a software engineer in and near Silicon Valley (even as it was just coming to gain that name). As an undergraduate at Stanford, I was surrounded by budding computer scientists who went on to found Internet companies. When I became a practicing Christian as a young adult, I had a hard time relating this familiar culture of innovation and entrepreneurship to my experience of church. Christianity offered a welcome alternative to the materialism and competitiveness of Silicon Valley. The church must embody alternative ways of seeing and living in the world, if it is to be faithful. Yet I found myself struggling with the church's propensity to focus primarily inward on those already a part of it, to force newcomers to learn a foreign cultural language in order to participate (a language that had little to do with the uniqueness of the gospel), and to fail to connect with people in my generation and diverse neighbors in the wider community.

The fact is that most churches—like most organizations generally—are not designed for innovation.[3] If you were to ask most people what words come to mind when they think of "church," I suspect few would offer "innovative." For churches

focused on trying to survive in an increasingly inhospitable cultural environment, the concept of innovation can seem intimidating or overwhelming. It can seem a risky departure from how things have always been done—jeopardizing the allegiance of existing members who sustain the church. It can seem like one more task to add to already burdened leaders on the edge of burnout.

The examples of innovative churches celebrated in the media often operate in cultural contexts or with theological assumptions far removed from one's own. Most local churches are not called to become the next multisite megachurch or hipster emerging church. A different future awaits them to be discovered. It can be tempting to despair of the capacity of ordinary local churches to learn, adapt, and grow creatively in ministry in order to connect with their neighbors. Yet the biblical narratives are all about God working through ordinary, fallible, often uncooperative people who only dimly grasp their place in God's story. God does not give up on us; the heart of the Christian story is God bringing life out of death. As we will see in the discussion that follows, innovation is a profoundly biblical and theological theme.

Organized for Establishment

There are good reasons why many churches do not feel equipped today to engage in practices of innovation for the sake of Christian witness and service. In the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, the church is the inheritor of a long legacy of cultural establishment in which Christian identity and practice were generally thought to be supported by the surrounding culture. For generations, the church didn't have to focus on learning from neighbors how to be in ministry with them. It could assume people would find the church (on its terms) if they were interested. The church had a clear role in society—to hallow life's transitions,

to take care of its members, to be a source of moral uplift to individuals and society, to get people into heaven, and to enrich Western culture.

This legacy of establishment has many dimensions. To begin with, churches tend to assume that their neighbors know who Jesus is, what church is, what churches do, and how to differentiate between types of churches (all of which were a mystery to me growing up). We assume parents teach their children the Christian story and practices at home, which Sunday school reinforces. Yet many parents don't know the story or practices very well themselves. Worship is often organized with the assumption that people can place the fragments of Scripture that we offer them (for instance, in the lectionary) into the wider narrative arcs of the Bible in order to make sense of them. Yet the church often hasn't taught those narratives effectively.

When newcomers show up, the church often focuses on assimilating them as participants in a voluntary religious organization ("have you filled out a pledge card?") rather than concentrating first on introducing them to Jesus and his Way. Churches often create little space for their members to share their real struggles with understanding, believing, and living the faith in daily life without fear of being shamed. Instead, church leaders assume that what the church says is understood, believed, and practiced, which is often not the case. Evangelism is often understood as inviting people to church, rather than equipping disciples to offer credible witness to Jesus within their relationships and spheres of influence. Such witness assumes the capacity to articulate the Christian gospel in personal and accessible terms—something many of the church's members struggle to do.

The establishment legacy assumes the church stands in a posture of centrality and power in its wider community, with a privileged moral voice. The church takes stands on various issues with the assumption that people will pay attention and listen to

it on matters of public concern. Yet over the past decade, what the wider society has heard about the church in the media has been one scandal, moral failing, and conflict after another. Credibility must now be earned in the face of widespread skepticism. Outreach and social ministry efforts have typically been approached in the establishment mode as benevolence, where resources or services are dispensed to the less fortunate, often at arms' length. The church often assumes it knows what is best for the neighbor without having to listen, learn, and receive from the neighbor first.

The central challenge facing churches today is rediscovering who they are in a society that has in many ways rejected Christianity. Christian community cannot be assumed; it must be cultivated intentionally, both within established congregations and with new neighbors. This work is not primarily a matter of secular strategic planning, where we envision what we want our church to be in five years and develop a plan to manage our way into that future. It calls for a much deeper theological and spiritual rediscovery that recognizes God's presence, movement, and calling as primary to its identity.[4] It invites the church into a different posture—a posture of learning, vulnerability, and creativity.

Scholars of innovation observe that in the face of complexity, organizations must have good conversations about assumptions.[5] Each church in its context is unique, and the assumptions shaping your church's life and witness may differ from those named above. Yet wherever it is, the church can no longer take the assumptions by which it operates for granted. In the face of significant cultural change and complexity, assumptions must be articulated and wrestled with. When they no longer fit where we are today, they must be revised and adapted, which requires holding the life and patterns of our churches lightly enough to change them for the sake of loving our neighbors in Christ.

Treasures New and Old

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus concludes a teaching session on parables by saying, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:52). The church has innumerable treasures in its life and history. These include the Bible in all its rich and diverse witness; the sacraments; practices like prayer, service, hospitality, reconciliation, testimony, and Sabbath; stories of faith heroes through the ages; doctrine; liturgies and worship traditions; and art, music, and other creative expressions of the faith. Every local church has in its own history powerful stories of Christian vitality and witness particular to its place, local "saints" who embodied the gospel to their neighbors. Sometimes these are people we know; other times they are legendary members of previous generations. Typically they are ordinary people through whom God does extraordinary things.

To be a church leader today is to be like that scribe trained for the kingdom who brings forth treasures new and old. It is tempting, in the face of many churches' establishment legacy and the missionary dilemmas surrounding us, to think we can somehow start over from scratch or "reboot" the whole Christian enterprise as if it were a computer that had frozen up. We might assume that traditional churches had been rendered obsolete like old typewriters in a digital age. But that is not at all the case.

What is required today is *traditioned innovation*. Innovation must remain rooted in the riches of Christian wisdom and practice from other times and places in order to offer deep, sustaining, faithful gospel witness. Otherwise, it might instead be based on a leader's charisma, idealized notions of community life, or some media or technology fad. Such innovations typically do not last. Any community that survives over time must adopt regularized

patterns of life together. This institutionalization need not become bureaucratic ossification that chokes off creativity and growth.

Innovation grounded in tradition is what God's people have always done. The Bible itself is a great compilation of diverse voices and stories in which God's revelation in history is interpreted and reinterpreted through changing circumstances. God brings forth what is new in the life of Israel and in the church always in relation to what has been. The church's history consists of the renewal and retrieval of stories, traditions, and practices amidst the dilemmas and difficulties of new moments.

Yet so much of the debate about church renewal today seems to operate in unhelpful dichotomies or romantic idealism. There are those who want to create an "Acts 2" church of perfect community, while paying less attention to the remaining chapters of that biblical book, which are full of messy conflict and persecution as the early Jesus movement is dispersed from Jerusalem in mission. Others skip right over centuries of church history in trying to return the church to a more pure emulation of Jesus through recovering a primitive model of apostolic leadership. They seem to have little use for existing congregations in their particularity and complexity. There are those who embrace the latest media technologies and consumer marketing strategies in order to distance themselves from any traditional form of church, only to fall prey to the cultural captivities underlying contemporary consumer and entertainment culture. Others resist innovative expressions of Christian community in the name of old establishment models, such as the geographical parish. Yet that form of church is clearly not connecting well with most people within the "parish" bounds. Being a church for the neighborhood demands adaptations in habits and language in order to speak to neighbors that many churches are unwilling to undertake.

In its own way, each of these approaches brings a fruitful impulse to the conversation. But they tend to frame the question

as an either/or, tradition *versus* innovation. It must be a both/and. We are called to bring forth treasures new and old. The answer today is not to hold on to existing forms of church life and practice unyieldingly when they no longer function well, nor is it to jettison established patterns wholesale. It is a matter of careful discernment, the cultivation by Christian leaders of the treasures of the tradition and a community's life so as to invite people into life-changing discipleship and witness. It is also a matter of *translation*—recognizing that the gospel always comes embedded in cultural forms, and as the cultural context changes, the shape of the church's life and witness too must change.[6] This is the deep logic of incarnation.

The incarnation signifies God's definitive revelation to humanity in person—through a particular human life, lived in a particular culture, in deep continuity with God's revelation to Israel. Jesus embodies God's presence as the one in whom humanity is reborn (or, in the classical words of the tradition, *recapitulated*; Ephesians 2:15). In Jesus the old era of humanity ruled by sin and death is replaced by a new era (Romans 5:12–21). The old reign of estrangement, disobedience, and division in which we are all implicated becomes in the faithfulness of Jesus a new humanity reconciled and restored within a new community encompassing every culture, tribe, and nation. Paul writes, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The incarnation is in this sense a definitive divine innovation—the renewal of a human nature grown old, corrupted, and alienated. The root of the term "innovation" is the Latin word *nova*, meaning "new." God the Creator continually authors new life and also continually renews the creation by transforming in the Spirit what has fallen away from true identity, purpose, and right relationship. The cross and resurrection of Jesus define this story

of innovation as we see humanity redeemed from the powers of oppression, violence, torture, and death.

This book explores what it might mean to understand God's innovative activity in creation, in the covenant people Israel, in Christ, and in the power of the Spirit as disciples form and renew Christian community in a pluralist age. The conversation will encompass both church planting and innovation within established churches. The formation of new expressions of church in order to incarnate Christian witness and service faithfully with those not reached by existing churches is absolutely vital. At the same time, most churches already exist and have rich histories upon which to build in adapting their lives for the sake of connecting with new neighbors.

Rediscovering Our Identity as Learners

Innovation involves learning. Learning is not easy for any of us—it is risky. There is always the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of failure. It exposes our lack of competence, mastery, and control. It is frequently uncomfortable. There are many good reasons why churches resist learning. Foremost among these is the prospect that learning will involve change, and change will involve loss. Many churches today are paralyzed or numbed by grief over the loss of their children, grandchildren, vitality, and influence. They struggle with the prospect of losing cherished customs or known patterns, even if doing so might be necessary to adapt the church's life to speak to younger generations and diverse neighbors.

Learning is also necessary for our growth. Ephesians 4:15–16 says, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's

growth in building itself up in love." To be a disciple of Jesus is to be a student, learner, or apprentice in a community of mutual growth in love. It means collaborating together, using all the spiritual gifts with which God has equipped us. It also involves mutual support, accountability, and encouragement.

When we read through the biblical narrative, we find that Jesus's disciples had a lot to learn about what it means to follow him. As we will see in chapter three, most of the time they seem fairly clueless, even in the presence of Jesus himself. Peter represents both the boldness and fallibility of this group of disciples. After the ascension, the disciples are led by the Spirit into powerful witness across cultural barriers but are perpetually learning and discerning the depth and reach of the gospel. This unfolds through resistance, persecution, misunderstanding, imprisonment, and much apparent failure.

The presence of failure at the heart of these biblical narratives of learning to follow Jesus should not surprise us, as failure is integral to learning and growth. One of the mantras of Silicon Valley is, "Fail early to succeed sooner."[7] Innovators know that the path to success inevitably proceeds through failure—often many, many failures. What does this mean for Christian disciples accustomed to a church that seeks power, mastery, and control rather than vulnerability, openness, and learning in mission? What role does failure play in the Christian story?

At the heart of the gospel is an apparent failure that shocked Jesus's students (disciples)—the crucifixion. Nothing could be more disappointing to those who wanted Jesus to overthrow the Roman oppressors than his betrayal, imprisonment, torture, and execution at Roman hands. Crucifixion was the most shameful and painful way to die in Jesus's world. It is no wonder that Peter and the other disciples went back to their old life of fishing.

Yet it is precisely in the embrace of the worst of human circumstances that victory and renewal spring forth in Christ. We

should hold the terms "success" and "failure" lightly in our discussion of innovation, as we recognize the profound paradox at the center of God's redemption of the world. What might seem to be "successful" in conforming to the world's expectations might be far removed from how God is in fact renewing the world in Christ through the power of the Spirit. From a Christian perspective, the greatest apparent failure of all—the cross—is the very means by which God's purposes are accomplished.

Questions for **Discussion**

1. Share a story of a time when you personally risked making a "good mistake" by trying something new. What was that experience like?
2. Identify a moment in your congregation's life in which you tried and failed in connecting with your neighbors or with different populations and generations. What did that experience teach you?
3. What in your congregation's current life represents a *traditioned innovation*—a new practice, custom, or initiative that is rooted deeply in what has gone before?