TRADITION AND INNOVATION

ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission
VOL 34, ISSUE 3

Michael Moynagh
HOW CAN THE CHURCH HOLD TRADITION AND INNOVATION TOGETHER? AND WHAT PROCESSES OF INNOVATION ARE INVOLVED?

On the one hand we have tradition, which is established ways of doing things – accepted customs, beliefs, practices and so on. On the other is innovation, which changes the rules of the game.

You can have radical innovation. The first Messy Church radically changed the rules of the game for doing all-age worship, for example. And you can have incremental innovation, which involves small changes to the rules of the game. In a Messy Church, you might change the sequence of craft activities, worship and food.

How do these two forms of innovation relate to tradition? To help answer that, I shall lay some theological foundations, describe six processes of innovation, contrast the managers’ and the innovators’ mindsets, and suggest when the second of these is more appropriate. The connecting thread will be how innovation and tradition reinforce each other.

But first, how has innovation been understood?

UNDERSTANDINGS OF INNOVATION

Denning and Dunham summarise the main descriptions of how innovation works.1 Each approach or set of approaches has strengths and weaknesses. One, for instance, highlights the gifted individual. Innovation is the work of “heroic” entrepreneurs who have the right character traits and talents, and often a bit of luck. This perspective can generate inspiring and instructive stories, but underestimates the relational processes involved. Teams and partnerships play a central role.2

A second approach views innovation as the result of compelling ideas. Pipeline models, for example, portray innovation as a linear sequence of steps. These steps transform researchers’ ideas into products accepted by the market. The diffusion model, on the other hand, describes how innovative ideas spread from their source to others. It has caught some people’s imagination by distinguishing between innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. The trouble with both these examples of “compelling ideas” is that relatively few innovations move in an orderly way from idea to product. Often innovations are “spontaneous reactions to breakdowns: people do them first and call them ideas later… Many innovations seem to arise spontaneously without a definite source. Various leaders pop up, advance the innovation, then disappear. Blogging is a modern example.”3

A third set of approaches sees innovation as new practices. Peter Drucker, for example, argued that managers produce innovation through searching for opportunities, analysis, listening, focused execution and leadership (e.g. mobilising people and markets to support the innovation). He paid particular attention to identifying opportunities, which he believed was the biggest challenge. He encouraged managers to look for opportunities in breakdowns, problems, threats and changes in business methods and demographics.4 This perspective has the advantage of focusing on practices that can be learned. A weakness is that it tends to privilege analytic techniques, such as market research to assess the opportunities. Attention is drawn away from human relationships, trust, intuition and building political support.

To correct this imbalance, Denning and Dunham have proposed eight practices for innovation: sensing, envisioning, offering, adopting, sustaining, executing, leading and embodying. These practices happen in conversations and contain skills that can be acquired. This highlights what innovators can learn, but in concentrating on innovators, the approach – like Drucker’s – tends to be individualistic. It does not say enough about the systemic processes of innovation. After all if, as Denning and Dunham recognise, the emergence and spread of innovations often take people by surprise, how does the Spirit blow through the church to harness this “accidental” process?

No one approach can capture all the complexities of innovation. A pragmatic mixing of approaches to fit

---

3 Denning and Dunham, The Innovator’s Way, 64–65.
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

If we want to root innovation in God, where might we start? Creation could be a tempting answer. It might be said that God innovated when he created the universe. However, Christians have traditionally believed that this was creation from nothing. God used no pre-existing materials to form the universe. And this is a problem in relation to innovation because innovators do not start with nothing. They start with what they’ve got.

Indeed, innovation typically involves bringing together two or more elements that were previously kept apart. Goldstein, Hazy and Silberstang quote Kary Mullis, Nobel Laureate in Chemistry: “In a sense, I put together elements that were already there, but that is what inventors always do. You can’t make up new elements, usually. The new element, if any, it was the combination, the way they were used.” Café and church would be an ecclesial example.

Before creation, there were no “rules of the game” for God to change, and so innovation by definition was impossible. A better theological starting point may be the new creation, where there are “rules of the game” to be altered. The kingdom of God is innovation on a cosmic scale. Under the lordship of Christ, the Spirit is recombining the elements of creation so that they more fully accord with God’s will. These new combinations are innovative. They radically change the rules. When this process of recombination – of innovation – is complete, God’s reign will be revealed in full.

Building on theologies of hope, Godly innovation is what happens when the divine future comes head-to-head with the present. The Spirit brings new possibilities from the kingdom into the here-and-now. These possibilities are a source of hope because they do not depend on the fallibilities of the human journey so far: they arise from God’s reign. Equally, they are not impositions that take no account of the past. They fit and burrow into the traditions generated by history, while also leading in a new direction.

It should go without saying that it is in the nature of tradition to innovate, not least within the church. An unchanging tradition risks becoming detached from reality because reality never stands still. Especially in an age of rapid change, to stay relevant a tradition must keep up with the changes round it.

That is one of the themes of the book of Job. Job’s so-called comforters base their responses to his suffering on what they have learned from their tradition. Their tradition says that the righteous will be blessed and the unrighteous cursed. Here is Job apparently being cursed. Therefore, according to their tradition, he must be unrighteous. But Job protests his innocence, a claim affirmed by the narrator.

As David Ford points out, the reader is left asking, “What happens when the tradition no longer works? What do you do when the tradition no longer accords with everyday experience?” The answer is that you start to innovate. Innovation is born when the tradition stops being effective and people wrestle with their response. Innovation arises from a felt need for tradition to catch up with experience.

However, innovation cannot turn its back on tradition. To take root, innovation must connect to the tradition. Years ago, my doctorate was in the field of South Pacific history. I remember reading how the first missionaries in the region encouraged their converts to practice generosity. Among the islanders, generosity was a means of gaining status. The more you gave, the higher your status. So giving often occurred very publicly.

The missionaries cottoned on to this and encouraged Christians during worship to throw their offerings into the middle of a circle. (Not something that would work in the UK, I suspect!) People would see how much everyone else had given, and the person who gave most would have their social status confirmed. As so often in the church’s history, one reason the islanders embraced Christianity was that those who brought the gospel connected this innovation to the pre-existing tradition. Relating the new to what currently exists enables people to own it.

So, on the one hand innovation happens when the tradition seeks to catch up with changes in social experience. On the other, innovation survives when you

---

5 For example, Margaret J. Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006).
9 Job 1:1.
connect the new to the tradition already present. The issue is not either tradition or innovation, but how the two are combined and feed off each other.

This is illustrated in the six processes I believe are essential to innovation. These processes are not sequential. They interweave in and out of each other, and are mutually dependent. They demonstrate how innovation and tradition exist in a dynamic relationship, and in many ways require one another. I shall illustrate these processes through the story of Caroline, who led a fresh expression of church in north-west London and about whom I have also written in Church in Life.11

DISSATISFACTION
The first process of innovation is dissatisfaction. Innovation does not happen unless there is dissatisfaction with the status quo. Note the role played by jolts and crises, which invite new ideas.12 Equally, as Goldstein, Hazy and Silberstang suggest, dissatisfaction may begin with a growing realisation that “business as usual” does not work.13

You would never do anything new unless you were discontent with the present. Perhaps the present isn’t working, or you can see better ways of doing something. You feel dissatisfied because the present could be improved.

That was Caroline’s experience. She was a schoolteacher. An increasing number of immigrants and others from ethnic minority backgrounds were moving into the area. Caroline felt frustrated because her local church – her local Christian tradition – had so little contact with this changing population. This discontent fuelled her determination to do something about it.

Innovation starts with a “holy dissatisfaction” or a “prophetic discontent”. It’s a dissatisfaction that says, “The tradition as we’ve got it is not working as well as it might.” The old is revealed as inadequate before the new is born. This is a challenge to those who think that the main task of leadership is to keep everyone happy. If you want improvement, you need some people not to be happy.

EXPLORATION
A second process is exploration – exploring how something new might work within your tradition. Caroline, for example, began to explore how her church might make connections with its new neighbours. How might it start something new to build relationships with them, while remaining faithful to the tradition it had inherited? Caroline’s exploration involved four processes.

First, as Sarasvathy found in her study of commercial entrepreneurs,14 Caroline started with what she had:

- who she was – a primary schoolteacher,
- what she knew – how to teach and that many mothers could not speak English, and
- who she knew – people in the church who might help her.

Secondly, she began to ask herself, “What if?” “What if I did this?” Or “What if I did that?” In his book on design thinking, Nigel Cross describes how engineers, architects and other designers approach design problems by thinking about possible solutions. They keep asking “What if...” until a solution emerges.15

Caroline appears to have done something similar. She was designing a solution to the problem of ethnic minority women not being able to speak English. So she began to think about possible solutions, such as a language course. But she realised that this would involve writing course materials, setting assignments, and that she would probably need qualified helpers. It would take too much time. So she dismissed the idea.

Eventually, she asked herself, “What if we run a weekly language café – invite the women to an English afternoon tea, sit round small tables and invite them to discuss a topic in English?” Maybe she exclaimed “Wow!” at this point, because often when you keep asking “What if?” and finally get the answer, “Wow!” is the natural response. Then she tried the idea to see if it would work. What if? What wows? What works?16

Thirdly, Caroline listened carefully to the people she hoped to serve, some of whom she knew. Much of this listening seems to have been implicit. She imagined asking people what they thought of an idea and their replies. In particular, she imagined inviting these mainly Sri Lankan mothers to afternoon tea in the church hall. And as she did so, she realised that many would find it quite daunting – the church was not part of their housing estate. So she decided to use the community hall instead. The facilities weren’t as good, but it was familiar territory for the women concerned.

14 Sarasvathy, Effectuation: Elements of Entrepreneurial Expertise, 74–81.
As well as this implicit listening, Caroline also consulted some of the Sri Lankan women as her plans took shape. Then, fourthly, when she had a concrete plan, she tried it out. She did a trial run and modified the arrangements in the light of what her team learned.

Caroline started with what she had, she kept thinking of possible solutions, she listened attentively and she experimented. By starting with what she had, she didn’t waste time coming up with ideas that were beyond the resources available to her. Nor did she innovate in a field that was outside her expertise – she built on what she knew. By brainstorming different solutions, she widened her thinking to embrace an unexpected possibility. By listening carefully, she checked her idea would work and shaped it round the women involved. And by experimenting, she took nothing for granted. This is the essence of the exploration process.

SENSE-MAKING

The third overlapping process of innovation is making sense – to yourself and to others – of the idea that begins to emerge. This is a more subtle process than just coming up with a vision. As Simon Teasdale shows, it is about telling different yet consistent stories to the people involved – stories that will convince them by connecting with their histories.17

This is what Caroline did. She told a story first to herself. She had read Mission-Shaped Church (2004). She was very taken by its incarnational theology. So she told herself the story, “Just as the Son of God went out to the culture of first-century Palestine, so in a small way I am trying to go out to the people from Sri Lanka.”

To her local church, she told a slightly different story: “For over 100 years we have supported overseas mission. Overseas has now come to us. What are we going to do about it?” Then to the Sri Lankan women she told a different story again: “We want to be good neighbours and welcome you to this part of London. We’d like to invite you to tea, and help you practice your English.”

Each of these three stories, all consistent with each other and with a common thread, connected with the tradition or history of its audience. Caroline’s story to herself connected with her tradition of missional concern. She was passionate about the church reaching out. Her story to the church connected with its tradition of supporting overseas mission. And her story to the Sri Lankan women connected to their recent history of arriving in the UK.

Storytelling is vital to winning support for innovation. Analysis may excite the mind, but stories offer a route to the heart.18 Many innovators tell stories instinctively. But might their stories be improved if innovators were more intentional – if they thought more carefully about how their stories connect with the traditions of the various audiences they address?

AMPLIFICATION

The fourth process is amplification. It is the process by which innovation grows and spreads. Central to this is the role of networks. An innovation will spread through networks if people are well connected, but if they are not the innovation will spread more slowly.

This means that when authorities decide whether to support an innovator and look at the person’s track record, they should bear in mind the network context. The innovator may have had limited impact not because of lack of competence or because the idea was not much good, but because people are in small, isolated networks or scarcely linked at all.19

Especially important is the role of connectors: people who know plenty of others and whose views are taken seriously. In mission circles, they are often known as “people of peace”.20 They pass on the innovation to their friends and contacts. Caroline was almost certainly something of a connector herself. Through her teaching, she knew many of the Sri Lankan families she wanted to reach.

If Roberts and Sims21 are right that people follow stories rather than leaders, key skills that aid the spread of good innovation stories include:

- **Naming** what is observed.
- **Connecting** people to one another.
- **Nourishing** those who are inspired by the story, in particular by creating opportunities for them to learn together.
- **Illuminating** the emerging paradigm through face-to-face advocacy and on a variety of platforms.22

Yet, as I have already emphasised, innovation stories will only embed themselves in a pre-existing network if they resonate with the network’s tradition. Being sensitive to

the network’s history will enable the innovation to take a form that honours the network’s accumulated learning, its identity and its “core behavioural patterns”.

**EDGE OF CHAOS**

The fifth process of innovation is what complexity writers describe as staying on the edge of chaos. This refers to the boundary between chaos and order. An organisation too far in the orderly direction tends to become rigid and stuck. By contrast, travelling towards chaos involves moving away from order and towards change. The danger is that the organisation travels too far, falls over the cliff and lapses into chaos.

Innovating teams must keep a balance between order and change. They must not change too much too quickly, otherwise people will feel overwhelmed – it will all feel too chaotic – and in a church context, they will stop volunteering to help. Equally, they should not stray too far in the direction of order, lest order stifle change and they miss the opportunity for further innovations to enhance what they have started. They shouldn’t get into a rut.

When Caroline’s language cafe began, it could easily have settled into a weekly routine – every Thursday afternoon serve tea, encourage guests to discuss a topic in English and clear up afterwards. But Caroline wasn’t content with that. She kept looking for something more. She remained on the edge of chaos.

I remember meeting Caroline when she was training for ordination. After describing her language cafe, she said, “We’ve got a bit stuck. We don’t know how to move to a next stage. We want to be able to share the gospel appropriately, but we don’t know how.” Here was an attitude that was distinctly open to further change.

I suggested that her team invite the women to submit prayer requests and offer to pray for them. Caroline took the suggestion to her team, who decided to set up a prayer board. The women pinned their requests to the board, and then began talking about them. This helped to raise the spiritual temperature of the cafe. In time, the team followed this up with an Alpha course, at a different time of the week, specifically for the cafe’s guests.

This particular innovation, the language cafe, was developing its own weekly tradition: afternoon tea, discussion round tables, clear up afterwards. But, staying on the edge of chaos, Caroline refused to be limited by that tradition. She remained open to further change.

When an idea for an incremental innovation was put to her, the team adapted the idea so that it would fit with the cafe’s emerging tradition. The prayer board was new, but it was not intrusive. And the idea of prayer was familiar to many of the Sri Lankan women, who had a religious background. The prayer board could “take” because it fitted into the tradition of the cafe and its guests, even though the tradition of the cafe was relatively short. Complexity thinkers sometimes describe this embedding process as “path dependency”. Novelty takes root within the path of tradition.

Edge of chaos is about sitting on the boundary between being faithful to the tradition, including the developing tradition of your innovation, and being open to change. Some people find this an uncomfortable state because they are not in control. Caroline was open to change, but didn’t know what to do. All she could do was to wait and ask questions. She didn’t know where the answer would come from, nor even if she would get an answer. The answer was beyond her control.

So often leaders of innovation want to control what happens. They close down possibilities, and in so doing they impose too much order on their initiatives. Theologically, to leave room for the Spirit to act, innovators have to give up a significant amount of control, leave the future open and be willing for change to come from unexpected quarters.

**TRANSFORMATION**

As the last of the six processes, innovation involves transformation, particularly in the identity of those involved. Some of Caroline’s Sri Lankan women attended the Alpha course and continued to meet for regular Bible study. Who knows what changes in outlook, behaviour and self-perception resulted from that? Caroline’s volunteer helpers gained confidence and began to see themselves as being more capable.

Not least, before starting the cafe Caroline viewed herself as someone in the pews with gifts. After successfully launching the cafe, she came to see herself as having the ability to lead something new.

Her local church began to see itself differently, too. It gained confidence in mission, and in a small way this

---


contributed to the start of a Messy Church and a debt counselling centre. The church still came from the same tradition, but it began to articulate that tradition in new ways. Innovation need not be a threat to tradition. It can enable a tradition to find new means of expressing itself.

TWO MINDSETS

These processes of dissatisfaction, innovation, sense making, amplification, edge of chaos and transformation produce what I call “the innovators’ mindset”. This is very different to “the managers’ mindset”.

Managers

- Facilitate the status quo
- Have clear objectives, and devise plans with timelines to achieve them
- Avoid mistakes by developing processes, protocols and codes of behaviour that standardise practice
- Work within the organisation’s story and try to take it forward
- Seek permission from their seniors
- Value certainty, and seek to reduce uncertainty by sticking to the plan and controlling the environment where possible
- Try instinctively to preserve what they have got.

Innovators

- Are dissatisfied with the status quo
- Explore and experiment, which clarifies their objectives, instead of writing long-term plans
- Value failure as a means of discovery, using trial and error to provide feedback, from which they learn
- Create new stories more than working within existing stories
- Seek permission not from above, but positive feedback from those they serve (and other partners)
- Live on the edge of chaos and make the most of unexpected opportunities, instead of worrying about uncertainty
- Transform the status quo through their efforts.

Of course, you need both! Whether at the centre or on the edge of an organisation, sometimes you need a managerial approach and at other times you need the innovators’ mindset.

WHICH MINDSET IS APPROPRIATE WHEN?

Snowden and Boone’s Cynefin (pronounced ku-nev-in) decision-making framework points to an answer. They describe four contexts that require different types of decision making.

- Simple contexts are situations where the rules for what to do are easily followed – for instance, setting out a hall for worship or making an insurance claim.
- Complicated contexts are situations where the rules are known, but have to be applied with some skill. Preparing a sermon might be an example.
- Complex contexts are situations where there are no rules, or at least they are not known. Cause-and-effect relationships are unclear, and can only be identified in retrospect. You have to feel your way through to a solution. This is what Caroline was doing. There were no rules for how her church could engage recent immigrants from Sri Lanka. She and her team had to make it up as they went along.
- Chaotic contexts are crises, such as a fire, where leaders have to take control, stabilise the situation and then work out what to do next.

Clearly, the managers’ mindset is most appropriate in simple and complicated contexts, whereas the innovators’ mindset is just right for complex contexts. You need to explore, make sense of the situation and, when you have found it, amplify a solution that works. However, amid these complex contexts, the managers’ mindset will be appropriate at times – for example, when the decision has been taken to try an experiment. Then, objectives will be set, timelines drawn and other aspects of the managers’ mindset will come into play.

CONCLUSION

Complex contexts are especially prevalent within the church. That is because the church is different to most other organisations, which are run mainly by paid personnel and where senior staff, quite rightly, set objectives, write these objectives into job descriptions and do all sorts of things that minimise uncertainty. At
times, staff still have to operate in complex contexts, but these are well bounded.

By contrast, the church relies heavily on volunteers, and volunteers increase the number of complex contexts. Not least, volunteers come and go. A local church may build a plan around a volunteer who is well-connected to a nearby school, only to find that the person unexpectedly leaves for family or other reasons. The church cannot afford to advertise and pay for a replacement. It depends totally on who, if anyone, joins the congregation. Perhaps a new member is passionate about homeless people. Completely by surprise, the church develops a mission among rough sleepers.

Long-term planning can still play a role, but it is a more limited one than in most other organisations. Complex contexts tend to be more numerous, which means that we need church leaders who are at ease with them.

Leaders don’t have to be innovators themselves. In Mary Uhl-Bien’s language, they need not be generative leaders, who produce the new ideas. They can be enabling leaders who help the organisation make room for these ideas. Or they can be administrative leaders, who loosen structures and procedures to accommodate the new.28

 Whatever the role of the leader, more than most other organisations because of its voluntary nature, the church requires a combination of leaders who respond positively to the complex contexts it is inclined to face. Such leadership will combine generative, enabling and administrative roles, and ministers may be called to any of the three.29

This leadership will be more likely to emerge in churches that have a strong kingdom theology of innovation. For the kingdom, among other things, is the presence of innovation. God is dissatisfied with the existing creation.

In a process of exploration, the Spirit starts with what the Spirit has got, the world as it is, to bring about a new order – God’s promised future.

Scripture contains multiple stories that help to make sense of this future. One of these stories is about the kingdom being like a mustard seed. The seed grows into one of the largest trees in the garden. The kingdom amplifies. It is always on the edge of chaos. It brings things that are new, but they are integrated into what exists. So Revelation can talk about “a new heaven and a new earth”.30 The kingdom is both new and similar to the universe with which we are familiar. It is not so orderly that little change occurs, nor so dramatically new that the old evaporates into chaos. When we enter the kingdom, our identities are transformed into children of God, into being brothers and sisters of Christ.

The result is not the obliteration of tradition, but its renewal. In the kingdom, history receives new life. Innovation fertilises the tradition, and tradition is the soil in which innovation grows.

---

Michael Moynagh is based at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. He is Consultant on Theology and Practice to Fresh Expressions Ltd. He has written extensively on new forms of Christian Community, most recently Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology (SCM, 2017).

---


29 Moynagh, Church in Life, 95–97.

30 Rev. 21:1.
ANVIL: JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY AND MISSION

To contact the editors and for any copyright permission queries, please email anvil@churchmissionsociety.org

Opinions expressed by article authors are their own and do not necessarily represent Church Mission Society as a whole.

Photography by Jonny Baker (Apart from background photos on page 1 and 24)
www.flickr.com/photos/jonnybaker