
INTRODUCTION

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Today's changing contexts call Christian communities to embody the gospel in new ways and witness to God's reign in relationship with new populations and generations. This work involves discernment and engagement—listening, learning, imagining, collaborating, taking risks, and experimenting—as the Spirit creates new life. What is innovation for religious communities in light of the Spirit's work in the world? How can theological education embrace innovation in this new era?

Innovation, creativity, improvisation, experimentation—even the words engage the imagination and suggest new possibilities. The 2015 meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership (ARL) explored themes of Innovation and Leadership, and this issue of the *Journal* invites a broader audience into the conversation.

The conference presenters, authors of these articles, all teach at Christian seminaries. They also bring significant practical experience to their writing. In addition to their academic work, Dwight Zscheile and Jack Barentsen speak from extensive pastoral experience. Barentsen has worked as a church planter in the Netherlands, and Zscheile serves an Episcopal church in St. Paul, Minnesota, concurrently with his seminary responsibilities. Michaela O'Donnell-Long is the owner and managing director of a creative agency whose clients include organizations dedicated to reducing poverty and the Presbyterian Church (USA) program to train and equip leaders in new worshipping communities. All three authors approach innovation as academics and as practitioners.

Long-time ARL member Dwight Zscheile was the meeting's keynote presenter, and his article begins the conversation in this journal volume. Writing on "Disruptive Innovations and the Deinstitutionalization of Religion," he first sets the stage with an overview of the current cultural scene and its challenges for religious institutions. Beyond reviewing the statistics about the decline in religious affiliation, he explores how broad cultural changes affect the way people deal with the basic human

questions of meaning, identity, and belonging. How can the Christian faith and the church speak to people in this context? He looks for resources in Clayton Christianson's research on disruptive innovation: What happens when upstart companies move into the territory of established firms? The disrupters offer simpler, less expensive solutions that gradually tend to take over the market. Zscheile makes the connections to established churches with their cumbersome structures and captivity to existing constituents. He then suggests innovative practices and leadership actions, concluding with a theological reflection on why innovation is deeply traditional for Christians. Zscheile gifted all present with a copy of his book, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Church Publishing, 2014), which is reviewed in this volume.

Michaela O'Donnell-Long further explores the practice of innovation in "Fostering Space for Creativity in Religious Organizations." She notes that adaptive challenges require creativity, the ability to enact new ideas or meanings. Her article begins with theology, reflecting on how human creativity reflects and participates in the divine creativity. Our creative work anticipates God's final creation. Through offering our creative efforts, we can participate in what God is already doing in the world. It is not all up to us—what a freeing thought! But because we often fear failure, fostering creativity means creating safe and yet challenging spaces where people can try new things and collaborate with others. Continuing to discuss the "how" of creativity, she offers a map for leaders who want to foster creativity: set expectations of what needs to be accomplished, but build in room for discovery. Provide safe space to fail, and help people discover their intrinsic motivation as well as manage their fears. She examines the four kinds of fear that might hold us back: fear of the messy unknown, fear of being judged, fear of the first step, and fear of losing control.

In his article "Church Leadership as Adaptive Identity Construction in a Changing Social Context," Jack Barentsen describes and draws on social identity theory as a resource for pastoral practice. He argues that in order to lead innovation, a person must first have the credibility that comes from being perceived as part of the group. This social identity derives from

the ideas and concepts people have about a group and also includes emotional and normative or values dimensions. He suggests that leaders gain influence as they are perceived as ones who embody or represent the group. He contends that this makes it possible for the leader to help the group take the risks of innovation. Barentsen argues that pastoral leaders need to understand these identity dynamics and learn to influence them intentionally in order to influence a group toward a desired and different future. He then examines the apostle Paul's ministry as an example of innovative leadership through identity construction. Barentsen's research includes interviews of pastors to assess how this social identity approach relates to actual pastoral leadership practice in various contexts. The article summarizes ten interviews with pastors in three different countries: the United States, Germany, and Slovakia. Barentsen's book is reviewed later in this journal.

Scott Cormode's article is the first in a two-part series dealing with the question of how Christians innovate when our credibility depends on continuity with the past and honoring tradition. This article addresses the *meaning* of Christian innovation; the second (to be featured in the Spring 2016 issue) will discuss the *goal* of Christian innovation. Like Zscheile, he first reflects on the contemporary context, which he names as the end of Christendom. Cormode offers a clear definition of *innovation*; he sees it as helping people find meaning from God in the face of difficult situations. Thus, he sees innovation as a form of interpretive leadership. With the goal of maintaining commitment to Christian faith while finding new ways to express it, he asserts that innovation will come from mixing and matching existing ideas with new situations. Thus, for Cormode, innovation always involves using a cultural tool kit of available options. Accordingly, innovators are the people who have the most extensive tool kit: the richest network of paths that they can explore, the most rooms in their mental house, and the greatest access to the most diverse kinds of tools. Drawing on James K. A. Smith, Cormode argues that meaning-making leads to embodied action, and that the meaning-making comes before the action.

In her piece on “Song, Poetry, and Movement—Creative Exploration of *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*,” Sharon Henderson Callahan reflects on times when the process goes in the other direction. Sometimes embodied action comes before and leads to new understandings. She offers as examples her participation in a march in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, and a session of “artistic practice” toward the end of the April 2015 ARL meeting. She also notes that the opportunity to contribute to this meeting and journal issue gave her insight into a blind spot; in developing the *Handbook of Religious Leadership*, neither she nor her editorial board had thought to deal directly with topics of innovation and creativity. She asks: What new directions does this suggest?

The book reviews in this issue include two books written by contributors to this *Journal* issue. One is a review of Dwight Zscheile’s book, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*, and the other is a volume coedited by Jack Barentsen: *Leadership, Innovation, and Spirituality*. This issue also features our first-ever review of a Web site, mckinsey.com. McKinsey&Company is an international consulting organization that works mostly with business, government, and not-for-profit organizations. The review highlights the resources available through the company’s Web site and points to ways these resources can help religious leaders.

Reflecting on the moments of artistic practice during last spring’s ARL meeting, Sharon Callahan writes: “I began to think again that the acts or disciplines related to creativity—the expansion of thought, the tension of holding something and releasing something, the practice of doing something not quite familiar, the process of putting disparate things or ideas together—all of these produced a transformation within each person and the group as a whole.” May this *Journal* issue offer new openings for creativity and innovation, so that we might participate more fully in God’s creative work in the world.

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