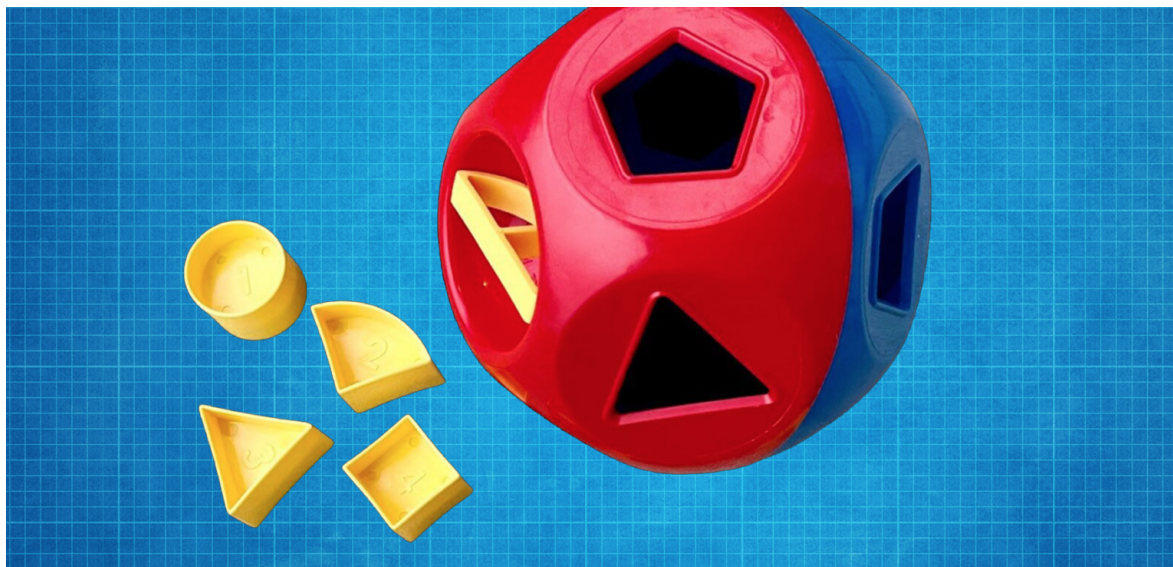


Leading Ideas



| 3 Strategies for Creating More Adaptable Ministries

By Meghan Hatcher On October 26, 2021

Leading Ideas

Meghan Hatcher explains that churches capable of adapting in response to the needs and assets of a community make it possible for more people to experience the transformative love and grace of Christ. She outlines three strategies to help a church be more innovative and adaptable.

Innovation enacted with intention can transform people's lives. Consider an example from the medical field: In the early 1990s laparoscopic surgery became commonplace and today accounts for the majority of abdominal surgeries, generally resulting in shorter recovery times, reduced pain, and a lower risk of infection. Cutting an incision across a patient's entire abdomen can still get the job done, but surgeons adopted new methods that have much better results for patients. The field innovated, and patients' lives were transformed as a result.

Innovation that transforms

Opportunities for transformative innovation in ministry are just as prolific. The discipline of ministry innovation involves taking deliberate actions guided by a church's context and unique theological convictions. It requires innovators to cultivate curiosity and empathy for those around them to develop ministries that engage people's assets and meet their needs in profound ways. The results can be nothing short of life-changing for the church and people involved.

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Contrary to popular definition, innovation is not simply about shiny new ideas or creative new ministry models. It is about investigating the present moment and allowing what you learn to impact what you do. Innovation in ministry requires churches to not become overly wedded to one form of ministry, but to instead prioritize the purpose and adaptability of the ministry above everything else.

A primary movement in the innovation process is prototyping — testing an idea on a small scale. The practice of prototyping powerfully illustrates that transformative ministries are those most open to changing. As the community and people evolve, so too should the ministry adapt.

How can a church create more adaptable ministries?

1. Identify the golden calves.

Spend any length of time in a church and you're likely to notice that some ministry models (program, event, service, outreach, activity, etc.) have been around for years, if not decades. This isn't automatically negative, but it is worth engaging your curiosity by asking: What's the purpose of this ministry model? Is it still fulfilling its purpose in this season of the church's ministry in our community? If not, why not?

2. Consider letting go.

If a ministry model is no longer fulfilling its purpose, it's time to consider letting it go. But why is this so challenging? In many contexts, staff and church members consciously, or subconsciously, assign value to ministries simply based on longevity. People say, "This ministry has been around for 20 years, we can't get rid of it!" Or worse, a ministry model continues into perpetuity simply because it always has.

If your church is ready to consider letting go of a particular ministry model, reflect together on these questions: What impact and emotions might be associated with letting this go? From whom? How do we need to communicate this, and to whom, so that people understand why we're letting this go? As part of our communication, how can we honor and celebrate the ways this ministry model served our community in the past? What resources (staff or volunteer time, building space, money, energy, mental bandwidth, etc.) do we gain by letting this model go? And the most enlightening question: How does letting this go make space for our church to more faithfully pursue our current mission?

3. Prototype a new idea.

As a church engages in this discernment process, you're naturally moving toward more mission-oriented decisions about ministry models. New ministry ideas are likely to pop up as creativity is unbound and encouraged. This is the perfect time to plan a prototype. A prototype is simply a low-stakes test of a ministry model that involves fewer people, less money, and is intended to be a learning experience.

Prototyping is integral to the innovation process. One barrier to implementing new ideas is often a perceived lack of resources like volunteers, money, and time. This perception of scarcity can kill an

innovative idea before it even hatches. Before moving to fully implement a new idea or advertising it to the entire church, test the ministry on a small scale by inviting just a handful of participants. As appropriate, consider borrowing resources that you'll need so you can wait to make any purchases until the ministry model is proven to be effective.

In initial planning conversations for a new idea, make a goal of conducting a prototype within one month. This intentionally quick turnaround will require the church's leadership to embrace a learner's posture. You'll be forced to test an idea while it's still in formation, rather than when it's fully developed and considered "perfect." This practice can be revolutionary for leaders and churches who are used to launching full-fledged ministries without first testing to see if the idea fulfills its purpose. As prototype participants share feedback about what works and what could be improved, the ministry model grows in effectiveness because it's inherently adaptable. This saves money, time, and energy, and leads to more fruitful ministries.

Adaptable ministry models are capable of shifting in response to the needs and assets of a community so that more people experience the transformative love and grace of Christ. Just like innovation in the medical field, ministry innovation can lead to fundamentally transformed lives. That's the true purpose behind the model.

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About Author



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Meghan Hatcher is the director of the [Innovation Laboratory](#). Her work involves walking alongside diverse leaders and congregations as they create an innovative culture and engage the practice of theological innovation for the sake of more impactful ministry in the 21st century.



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