The Hope of Traditioned Innovation

Cultivating Interdisciplinary Habits and Practices of Integrative Thinking and Improvisation Towards the Discovery of Generative Solutions to the Wicked Problems Found at the Intersections of the Deep Trends Facing Christian Institutions

by

Victoria Atkinson White

Date: 25 August 2016

Approved:

L. Gregory Jones, Supervisor

Kenda Creasy Dean, Supervisor

J. Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University
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ABSTRACT

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Churches and Christian institutions today face unique challenges in light of the deep trends found throughout their ecology. Complexity and wicked problems have the opportunity to prevail as the deep trends, such as the lure of cities, digitalization and a yearning for soulful connections among Millennials intersect and complicate the generation of solutions. New, and often renewed, habits and practices are needed to create the conditions for generative solutions to arise and strengthen Christian institutions and their leaders as they faithfully bear witness to God’s reign in the past, present and future.

Some critics say the church must start over in order to prove its relevance and value in society. While change and innovation are needed within Christian institutions, this line of thought disregards important values, traditions, stories and knowledge of the past. Traditioned innovation is a way of moving into the future with a creative and hopeful spirit while respecting and bringing forward the best of an institution’s history. Innovating within one’s tradition provides a foundation of faith, familiarity and knowledge on which institutions and their leaders can experiment and improvise their way into a Holy Spirit-inspired future.

Interdisciplinary habits and practices such as those found in improvisation and integrative thinking offer tools for generating innovative and dynamic solutions to many of the wicked problems facing Christian institutions today. This work highlights a few of
the most hopeful practices for institutions as they face the deep trends growing and intersecting in their landscape. These habits and practices cultivate the conditions for strong leadership commitments like traditioned innovation to flourish, while also offering hope for tomorrow and a brighter future for those working so diligently to bear witness to the reign of God.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the faithful leaders of Christian institutions who stand firm in the best of their traditions and bravely innovate, improvise and experiment their way to a Holy Spirit inspired future. God be with you.
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To God be the Glory. Amen.
Chapter 1: Deep Trends Facing Christian Institutions

Mere days before the turn of 2016, Religion Dispatches headlined, “American Christianity Is Changing Fast: Five Stories to Watch in 2016.” The stories are: The Emptying of Church Pews, Increased LGBT Acceptance within Evangelicalism, The Francis Effect, The Localization of Church, and Urban Ministry Goes Mainstream. A few weeks later, a Christian Week columnist wrote that she believes American Christianity is in the midst of a “truly radical change, the kind that happens only every few centuries.”

A 2015 Religion News article announced what some are calling “The Great Decline” of religion in America due to the shocking number of 7.5 million more Americans no longer claiming to be active in religion. And a 2014 General Social Survey proclaimed that the “Nones,” those Americans who claim no religious preference, have risen to twenty-one percent of the population. Similar statistics project just as much gloom and doom for churches as over a third of Americans do not attend church. While they may not affiliate or darken the doors of a church, there is some hope in the statistic of eighty-three percent of Americans saying they still pray.

Religious news outlets are not the only ones painting the future of the church with foreboding dark strokes. Targeting an audience not prone to visit religious news outlets, popular mommy-blogger and best-selling Christian author Jen Hatmaker’s list of why the church is unappealing to the Millennial generation and younger reflects a similar

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4 In the bulk of this work, “church” will refer to the universal body of believers in Jesus Christ organized into particular communities of faith. At times, it will also refer to the average individual mainline Protestant
storyline, albeit one more emotionally charged, and offers a call for change. Her list of the church’s shortcomings includes:

- The church’s emphasis on morality and voting records over matters like justice and transformation
- A me-and-mine stance against you-and-yours
- A defensive posture, treating unchurched or de-churched people like adversaries
- An opposition to science
- Its consumerism
- Its group hostility toward the gay community
- An arrogance rather than humility

Her words are evidence that the need for change is noticed beyond the institutional structures which have held up the church for generations. She makes a call to a significant audience of passionate and committed Gen X and Millennial women trying to connect to each other, the church and something beyond themselves.

Here is where it gets real for us mamas: this is absolutely the trend. Ranier Research found that nearly three-quarters of American youths leave church between ages eighteen and twenty-two, while the Barna Group estimates that by

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church in the United States. We will also proceed with the assumption that the church and Christian institutions are dependent upon one another for support and innovative collaboration. These Christian institutions are among others, denominations; faith-based service organizations, schools, universities and seminaries; large scale congregations; and consultancies working for the church. Each depends on others for effective impact in the world. Because of assumed dependencies, unless otherwise noted, “Christian institutions” will be inclusive of the church.

5 I will proceed under the assumption that those in the Millennial generation (those born between approximately 1981-1996) are the ones the church is desperate to attract for the purposes of youth, building and sustaining legacy, and a notion of relevancy in a rapidly changing world. It should not go unnoticed however, Millennials will not be the ones able to fund the services or the bricks and mortar of the church for ten to twenty years, if, that is, they are schooled in the values of giving and tithing to Christian institutions. Until then, churches and Christian institutions will be seeking the financial support of Gen Xs and Baby Boomers, as well as their leadership and participation, even though Millennials represent what the church believes it needs and wants. Hatmaker, Jen. "For the Love." Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015. 87-88. Citing Drew Dyck, "The Leavers: Young Doubters Exit the Church," Christianity Today 54, no.11 (November 1, 2010), 42.

6 Ibid.
age twenty-nine, 80 percent of the churched population will become “disengaged” with the church culture. That’s 80 percent. Gone. These are our kids.7

Offering hope that all is not lost in the future of the church, Hatmaker goes on to cite a nationwide poll of eighteen to thirty-five year olds who listed what would draw or keep them in a church. Their answers are not surprising: 1.) community, 2.) social justice, 3.) depth, and 4.) mentorship.8 The answers she cites are similar to those in a recent Harvard study of non-traditional forms of community gatherings. According to How We Gather, Millennials are looking for a sense of purpose, community and the opportunity to make a difference.9 Not finding these needs met in traditional Christian settings, young adults are creating new communities to meet their needs. And these new communities, Christian or not, are thriving.10

Not long ago, the church was the definitive place for finding community, a sense of purpose and opportunities to make a difference. The local church was a light on the hill, a social and spiritual hub, the place where families worshipped, served, learned and even struggled and doubted together. Community was built around the local church. More so, the church, in many ways, was community. So what happened? How did the context change so quickly and so dramatically? Some blame the rise of technology,

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7 Hatmaker, For the Love, 87.


10 For more information on these communities, such as CrossFit, SoulCycle, CTZNWELL and Live in the Grey, among others, see Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, “How We Gather,” at https://caspertk.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/how-we-gather.pdf (accessed April 4, 2016).
claiming it meets the needs of connectivity and friendship. Others blame the urbanization of communities: the way suburban sprawl has lost its luster to the hip and cultural lure of city life. Perhaps, some might say, the Church has lost its relevance and can no longer offer a compelling message to hold the attention of those whose attention span is shaped by the immediate gratification of smart devices. Regardless of the reasons, many communities who once centered themselves around the local church as the place of community, are without that literal and figurative compass that once was the church. So what now?

Believing youth and young families are what churches need to thrive today, Christian leaders are willing to lend an ear to any possible trend or innovation promising to attract Millennials. Toward this goal, churches are doing their best to catch up with the rest of the world and read the minds of these smart, savvy, resourceful, efficient and often “entitled” individuals. What do they want? What do we need to do to lure them back, or in many cases, in to the church for the first time? Who do we need to be to attract them?

In answer to these questions, many churches put up screens and projectors for contemporary music, integrate pop-culture video snippets into sermons and dress so comfortably, one can practically role out of bed and into a pew. These changes have worked for some, but not for all, primarily, I believe because the church is asking the wrong questions.

The church has existed for over two thousand years through the rise and fall of empires, the migration of people groups across the globe, persecuting and being persecuted, and the movement from an agrarian to industrial and now to an information
driven economy. It has survived humanity’s missteps through God’s continuing grace and love for God’s people. The mission of the church, to make disciples of Jesus Christ, has remained the same since Jesus first uttered the words of this commandment. The mission of the church does not and will not change. Therefore asking *Who do we need to be to attract Millennials?* is not the right question because it is a question of mission, which is declared by God. Questions of *who* have already been answered: the church is to be makers of disciples of Jesus Christ. Instead, questions of models of the church are something churches and Christian institutions can faithfully consider, experiment within, and adapt to reflect shifts in culture and emerging generations. Appropriate and malleable questions about models are ones such as *How do we effectively communicate the love of God and the saving grace of Jesus Christ to this generation?* and *How do we tell a very old story in new ways?* The answers to questions about models are up to those Christians invested in the future of the church through the leading of the Holy Spirit.11

The church holds, and has always held, the answer to many of the questions Millennials (and those of all other generations) ask. I believe this is because the church’s

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11 An example of mission and models outside the world of the church can be found in the story of Steve Jobs and Apple. In the 1980’s, while CEOs of other technology companies were asking questions about how to sell more computers (their perceived mission), according to *The Economist*, Steve Jobs’ mission statement for Apple was: “To make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind.” (Brodget, Henry. “Apple’s ‘Mission Statement’ Is Making People Worry that the Company has Gone to Hell.” 3 August 2013. http://www.businessinsider.com. 3 April 2016.) With a focus on such a mission, he guided Apple in innovations in the technology industry far surpassing those of his competitors. Still today, with a focus on computers, but so much more, “Apple continues to lead the industry in innovation with its award-winning computers, OS X operating system and iLife and professional applications. Apple is also spearheading the digital media revolution with its iPod portable music and video players and iTunes online store,” not to mention the iPhone in the pockets of more than ninety-four million Americans (in 2015). (Reisinger, Don. “iPhones in use in the US Rise to 94M.” 15 March 2015. http://www.cnet.com. 4 April 2016.) Job’s mission was change the world with tools that advance humankind. His models ranged from computers to operating systems to the iPad, iPod, iTouch etc.
mission is grounded in God’s love for the world. The church’s mission is consistently committed to bringing about God’s reign on earth. However, in the face of rapid changes in the way we live, communicate and function in community, the church, in its current model, has lost much of its confidence, bearings and sense of tradition in the paralyzing fear of irrelevancy. Christian institutions would do well to remember that the church was Jesus’s idea, not that of humans. The mission of the church will always be at work through the power of the Holy Spirit and those faithfully responding to God’s call to make disciples of Jesus Christ. As the work of God in the world, the church, in its truest form, is here to stay; therefore, in order faithfully to move forward, the church needs to renew its sense of mission in the world and remember why it exists and wants to continue to be an influential and innovative model of grace, love and re-creation. Second, the church needs a new strategy,12 or perhaps, several renewed strategies to be open to shifting mindsets and develop models which create the conditions for human flourishing couched in Christ’s salvific message for all generations.

Developing new strategies for the church will be a challenging task given the deep trends and wicked problems13 facing Christian institutions today. Innovative,

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12 For my definition of strategy, I will be using the general leadership principle that strategy is about asking the right questions. Therefore, in this case, the Church needs to proceed with discerning the right questions in order to proceed in a spirit of traditioned innovation.

13 Wicked Problems will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. For now, I invite us to move forward with the following description of wicked problems: “Wicked problems have no definitive solutions but are instead perceived as having either no solution or a host of potential solutions. When a solution does exist, it cannot be objectively evaluated as being right or wrong but at best may be deemed to be better or worse than a competing solution.” O’Raghallaigh, Paidi, David Sammon and Ciaran Murphy. “A Re-Conceptualization of Innovation Models to Support Decision Design.” Journal of Decision Systems Vol. 20 April 2011: 361-382. Wicked problems can be also be understood in reference to their antonym: tame problems which are problems that can be reduced to a simple deductive question of oppositional choices.
generative solutions will come with commitment, diligence, patience, open-mindedness and the work of the Holy Spirit. Strong Christian institutional leaders\textsuperscript{14} root themselves in the mission of the church and model and lead their people to create the conditions for traditioned innovation\textsuperscript{15} and human flourishing. They do this most effectively by encouraging a combination of habits and practices often found across interdisciplinary fields of leadership such as integrative thinking and improvisation. This Holy Spirit-inspired work blazes a path enabling Christians and their institutions to bring heaven a little closer to earth and bear faithful witness to the reign of God.

In adapting habits and practices of improvisation and integrative thinking, Christian leaders can develop a platform on which they can nurture, strengthen and sustain specific leadership attributes critical to institutional generativity, namely: traditioned innovation, empathy and a focus on the reign of God. While these specific attributes share historical roots in Christian institutional leadership, singling out the combination of habits and practices of integrative thinking and improvisation as

\textsuperscript{14} The designation “strong Christian institutional leaders” will be used throughout this work to designate those Christian leaders who pay attention to the deep trends affecting churches and institutions so they can effectively navigate, nurture and strengthen the significant relationships contributing to the mission of the church. As will be seen as this work progresses, the work of strong Christian institutional leaders includes empathy, traditioned innovation, experimentation, improvisation and taking risks in the varying expressions of the body of Christ with the hope of maximizing the impact of the power of God’s love to all of God’s children.

\textsuperscript{15} To be discussed at length later, traditioned innovation is a helpful phrase originally coined by L. Gregory Jones, defined as “a way of thinking and living that holds the past and future together in creative tension, a habit of being that depends on wise judgement, requiring both a deep fidelity to the patterns of the past that have borne us to the present and a radical openness to the changes that will carry us forward. Our feet are firmly on the ground with our hands open to the future.” Jones, L. Gregory. \textit{Christian Social Innovation}. Nashville: Abingdon, 2016. 51.
foundational to their flourishing is new territory. These are attributes grounded in the biblical narrative and can be found in New Testament stories of Jesus and the way God has interacted with the children of God throughout Christian tradition. As we shall come to see, these habits and practices are part of a very old story; they are steeped in tradition and the ongoing mission of the church. God calls upon all Christian leaders to adapt and innovate within them to tell the old story with new vision and create and renew models of church to minister to the needs of all God’s children.

Deep trends affecting Christian institutions today

This chapter began with a rather gloomy projection of the future of the church, should it continue on its current path. Religious news outlets, pop-culture writers and others agree: something has to change. *But What? And How?* In 2012, L. Gregory Jones and Nathan Jones wrote about the deep trends affecting Christian institutions. The date on the article could just as easily be that of today, with the exception that there are more than their original seven. Their work is not written for shock value or propagating negativity about Christianity, as many of the aforementioned articles have been, thus we will proceed in looking at three of their specific deep trends because of the authors’ clear and dedicated hope for the church and their desire to provoke serious conversation about its future.

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16 Jones and Jones’ original seven deep trends are: the digital revolution, a multi-nodal world, reconfiguring denominations and emerging forms of congregating, questioning institutions, economic stress on Christian institutions, shifting vocations of laypeople, and the lure of cities. To be referenced later, the trend of “yearning for soul” was added in a 2016 *Faith & Leadership* article.
Jones and Jones identify their deep trends as contextual patterns shaping society and its institutions. Different from fads or speculation, the deep trends are prevalent throughout Christian institutions; and they are not disappearing any time soon. More so, additional trends are rapidly emerging posing new and different challenges to the status quo. In naming the trends, resulting dialogue can highlight changes in contexts so that adaptive measures can be explored. And certainly there are both enthusiasts and naysayers addressing multiple angles of each trend. Likewise, some institutions continue to try to ignore the pervasiveness of the trends within their contexts, which they do at their own peril and that of their stakeholders and members.

*The Digital Revolution: Connected, Linked and Synced*

Jones and Jones address the omnipresent digital revolution as the first trend facing Christian institutions. Their words concerning this trend hold even more truth today than they did four years ago. Citing the blessings and challenges of technology, they note value in the convenience of immediate communication across the globe, while at the same time outlining the drawbacks as this immediacy inhibits the intimacy that comes with the physically gathered body of Christ. Many will blame the unhealthy dependence Millennials seem to have with technology for a host of the ills associated with the digital revolution. However, according to the most recent studies, this is an unfair association. Millennials appreciate, and to some degree are dependent upon the perks of technology, which they include as increased time management, strengthened connections among

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friends and family, and organization. At the same time, they do not value technology above face-to-face interactions. Meaningful communal gatherings are very important to them. This discrepancy is something Christian institutions must take note of; it means Millennials, like the generations before them, want to gather together for meaningful interactions and connection. Contrary to how they may be stereotyped, technology is not the Millennials’ master.

Whether one is on the affirming and savvy side of technology or the fear and avoiding side, it is important to note that technology in itself is not “the problem,” “the answer” or “the issue” humanity faces with its rapidly paced changes and the levels of power it wields. It is a trend which is fluid and porous as it moves and develops throughout society. Sam Wells speaks to both the power and presumptions of technology when he writes,

Technology is attractive because it offers to make a better world without us needing to become better people. Those who oppose technology tend to assume the problem lies in technology, not ourselves. But by going along with the way the argument is generally set up, Christians underwrite the presumption that power and technology rule the world. In doing so, Christians fail to proclaim the heart of their faith: that it is God the Holy Trinity, creating father, crucified son, the outpouring spirit, who rules the world. …So from a Christian perspective the issue is not principally about power or technology, but about who is at the center of the world’s story.

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18 Working under the broadest definition of technology as anything which changes culture, technology is both a way of doing something and a way of gathering. Therefore, what is referred to today as technology is considered the communication and interconnectedness that comes from the use of the internet. However, much like many other forms of technology which have come before the Information Age: fire, the loom, the wheel, the yoke and plow, the printing press, the clock, and countless others, each of these was first considered a trend before its usefulness integrated itself into humanity such that it became a part of everyday life for most of civilization.

However, with time, a few things have become clearer. The digital revolution has
shifted from necessitating Christian institutions have Facebook pages, Twitter accounts,
livestreaming worship and online giving to a focus on how relationships are affected in
light of these digital tools. Wells’ statement that “technology is attractive because it
offers to make a better world without us needing to become better people” is not just
condemning of humanity, it is especially incriminating of the church. The church is in the
business of making better people through their expressions of love rooted in the example
and work of Jesus Christ. This is a primary task of the church, one that it cannot afford to
relinquish to the ambiguous world of technology. God holds the church accountable for
making better people and a better world in Jesus’ sharing of the most important of the
commandments: to love God and love one’s neighbor (Matthew 22:35-40). Technology
will not be asked to account for the church’s fulfillment of this important work; only the
church will. Accordingly, Christian leaders need to create the conditions for its members
and stakeholders to become better people regardless, or perhaps because, of today’s
technology.

Clearly Wells says technology offers to make a better world before he gets to the
proclamation of human shallowness in its poor use of technology. So how do we
capitalize on that first part? How does the church use technology to make the world
better, and hopefully at the same time, help make people better? Just as with any deep
trend, it is about the relationship one chooses to have with the trend. Rather than the often
superficial connections of social media, Christian institutional leaders can model and
encourage more authentic images of human flourishing. In light of polarizing and
simplified absolutes tossed across the internet in 140 characters or less, leaders have the opportunity to note the emotion in online conversations and invite participants into embodied community and values-based face-to-face dialogue which is more vulnerable and truthful. Rather than the perfect pictures of vacations, parties and impeccably coiffed all-American looking families, imagine a digital place where people are invited to share their actual realities on screen as they do in person. Online we miss the social awkwardness, the nervous laughter and children asking innocent yet embarrassing questions. What would social media look like if it truly reflected the beautiful and brutal aspects of our human life rather than a simulacra of it?

*Bright Lights, Big City: For Better and Worse*

One might think with the conveniences of technology, especially within working environments, Millennials would opt to avoid the high costs of relocating, expensive big city rent and hideous commutes, and maintain residence in the small to medium size towns preferable to their parents’ generations. With Wi-Fi, video-conferencing and the ease of travel among this generation, it seems they could enter any number of career paths from a home office (or a comfortable chair at Starbucks) and an internet connection. However the opposite appears to be true. While not long ago cities were emptying to suburban sprawl, today the trend has shifted and the direction of desired habitation is completely reversed. Millennials are not following in the footsteps of their generational predecessors; they are heading for the big city life in droves. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that urbanization grew by more than twelve percent in this country between 2000 and 2010. And within most Millennials’ lifetime almost seventy percent of
the world’s projected 9.3 billion people will be living in cities, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.\textsuperscript{20} What once was a consistent trickle of flight to the cities is now at the level of a gushing hemorrhage.

Some say the Millennials are the largest of the “Bright lights, big city” generation in their lure not just to cities and their outskirts, but with preferences for the city centers. Gentrification, for good and ill, tugs at both their hearts and their wallets. Social justice minded, they fight the idea of gentrification, and at the same time are powerfully lured to the most hip and popular “vintage” buildings in the center of downtown. According to Robert Lang, Professor of Urban Growth and Population Dynamics at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, this generation continues “a multigenerational pattern of young adults preferring more expensive urban areas over lower-cost rural ones because the lifestyles and opportunities in such places make the extra burden of cost worth it.”\textsuperscript{21}

Millennials are willing to allocate significant portions of their typically meager initial income to have access to big city offerings. To them, big cities equal success: economic, social, political, professional, and any other realm in which they are seeking to rise to the top of their field. Cities offer limitless opportunities the likes that small towns will never see. Interestingly, this comes in contrast to the stereotype of Millennials living in their parents’ basements for an “extended adolescence” because of outrageous student

\textsuperscript{20} The projected date for this city surge is 2050, when many of the Millennials, 80 million strong, will be approaching retirement. As with every generation, it will be interesting to watch the trends in their housing preferences as they age. Long term health care for seniors in already congested cities will present a new set of issues for communities if this generation does not maintain the current pattern of individuals leaving cities in mid and later life for a slower lifestyle in suburbs and small towns.

debt from both educational and recreational pursuits. However the statistics favor the young adults who are professionally motivated, socially minded, and drawn to the conveniences that come with the high rent districts of city life.

So what exactly is drawing them to the city? Professional success is self-explanatory. An active social life is assumed. What else does city life offer over a small town? Denser populations bring together talented, creative, motivated and resourceful people who will physically and figuratively connect because of close proximity. These connections promote collaborations, relationship building, think-tank type gatherings, and conditions for human flourishing. To this end, many large corporations are retracting previously granted work-from-home privileges for employees banking on both productivity and innovation growing simply by increasing the time and proximity employees spend together in communal offices. Trendy open offices, for good and ill, seem to encourage collaboration and cross-pollinating traditional silos of workplace silence. What is happening on the meta-level with cities growing in density is replicating itself in the micro-realm of business offices and even living quarters, due to high rent. As communal spaces are literally and figuratively becoming intentionally smaller, the ideas, connections and innovation possibilities are growing larger.

Certainly not everything about big city life is attractive to Millennials. Larger densities of people bring higher rates of economic disparity, crime, pollution and other

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22 In 2009, Geoffrey West discovered the Quarter-Power Law governing innovation: “A city that was ten times larger than its neighbor wasn’t ten times more innovative; it was seventeen times more innovative. A metropolis fifty times bigger than a town was 130 times more innovative.” Ultimately he found that as cities grow bigger, they generate ideas, find more patents and create more inventions because of the number of people in close proximity. Johnson, Steven. Where Good Ideas Come From. New York: Penguin Group, 2010. 8.
ills. However, to this socially minded generation, this as an opportunity for service on a larger scale than they feel they could achieve in a small town. They feel empowered being a part of a large team of diverse like-minded resources pooling together to fight the ills of today’s social inequalities. So even for its worst offerings, the city can be a place of opportunity, growth, innovation and change. Christian institutions have the opportunity to capitalize on Millennials’ creativity and passion in service to others. Urban ministry settings offer young city-dwellers everything they say they are seeking: community, purpose, and the opportunity to make a difference, all on their front doorstep.

*Soul Connectedness: Be in Community, Find a Purpose, Make a Difference*

It may seem strange to some that early in this chapter there is a significant reference to Jen Hatmaker, a popular mommy-blogger and Christian writer. However, voices like hers are the ones Millennial (and many Gen X) women are flocking to for community, purpose and affirmation they are not alone in the increasingly materialistic, challenging and complicated task of emerging into adulthood and early mid-life as a woman in the United States. They are seeking soul connections—others who understand, or are empathetic to their triumphs and challenges at the very core of their being.

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23 See also the work of New York Times best-selling author Glennon Doyle Melton of Momastery.com, the community at ScaryMommy.com, best-selling author Elizabeth Gilbert and renowned psychology speaker/writer Brene Brown. These are the equivalents of Gen X’s Oprah Winfrey and her “Soul Series.”

Technology and social media have placed unachievable and false visual images of perfection everywhere one looks. Facebook communicates everyone has five star vacations. Pinterest allows one to find the exercises for perfect abs, design locally sourced vegan meals for a dinner party of twenty and plan a wedding the likes no one has ever seen—all at the click of a mouse. Sites like Tinder have singles posting pictures so unlike themselves to earn a “swipe” in the right (or is it left?) direction to meet their fairytale mate. It is a world that is both real and not real. And most Millennials, while they may be known as the generation of social media, are smart enough to know the difference. Many of them are savvy enough to have figured out how to leverage the most of their virtual and IRL (in real life) worlds to get the best of both.

Millennials watched their parents make difficult choices between work or home life. But the lives of these young people are much more integrated. They believe they will have fulfilling work and home lives. Continuing with their integrated outlook, they are both globally motivated and locally committed. They want to buy local and support their neighbors. At the same time many of them take personally the atrocities occurring throughout the world and suffer with their global neighbors via live twitter updates and in real time video feeds of horrific tragedies. Their sense of social responsibility is deeply connected to their soul and who they identify themselves to be. Ninety-two percent say that “making the world a better place” is important to them. And eighty-eight percent of Millennials think being involved in community efforts is important.\textsuperscript{25} For all the stereotypes of Millennials being spoiled and entitled are an equal or better representation

of those with deep and soulful connections to their communities and humanity. For many of them, they would like to make soulful work their life’s work.

The old assumption of graduating from college and finding a “good job” where one can be financially self-sufficient is more challenging for Millennials due to their placement in the midst of a dire economic climate. And “good” is a significant word choice for them. Financial success is important, but not as important as a sense of accomplishment in making a difference in a company and its community. They want to know their contributions matter. Not finding this in many of the corporate structures in which they begin their careers, thirty-five percent of employed Millennials are trying to put their creativity to use making a living and contributing to the overall well-being of their communities by starting a small business on their own. This generation is meeting their economic challenges by creating new opportunities rather than trying to force themselves into pre-established roles and relationships of previous generations, fulfilling their soul’s desires for contribution and purpose with their community’s needs of their skills and talent.

As Millennials are charting their own paths for community and purposefulness, the How We Gather study by two Harvard Divinity School students has brought language and poignant questions to this largely values-based culture shift. Referring to the new ways of gathering for purpose, community and making a difference, they write, “We


27 The institutions to which they refer in their study are: The Dinner Party, CrossFit, SoulCycle, CTZNWELL, U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, Millennial Trains Project, Live in the Grey, Juniper
hope that these organizations begin to see themselves as part of a broader cultural shift
toward deeper community. By consciously coming together, we think they could form the
DNA of a fruitful movement for personal spiritual growth and social transformation. We
invite you to join us in considering how millennials are changing the way we gather.”

At the Intersections: Wicked Problems

Stephen Marche’s fascinating article Is Facebook Making Us Lonely? speaks to the particularly wicked problem that develops at the intersection of the aforementioned three deep trends affecting Christian institutions. At the crossroads of the digital revolution, the lure of cities and the yearning for soul connectedness, humans find ourselves both as connected and as lonely as we have ever been. Generations one hundred or even one thousand years ago could not imagine the kind of connectedness taken for granted today. They would also likely be horrified at how isolated and alienated many feel, even with increased ease of accessibility. Marche writes that humanity has never been more detached from one another and yet “in a world consumed by evermore novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerated contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are. We were promised a global village; instead we inhabit the drab cul-de-sacs and endless freeways of a vast suburb of information.”


The intersection of the deep trends of the lure of cities, the digital revolution and the yearning for soul connectedness presents an interesting wicked problem in terms of how small it makes one’s world. Contrary to common thought, social media can make one’s life much smaller than it appears. While one may have a number of “friends” or followers, when posts or tweets are limited to a finite number of characters, discussions quickly dissolve to simplified absolutes, polarizing “friends” and forcing binary arguments. The same is true even when there is more room for discussion such as in email groups, discussion forums and blogs. In the middle of such an urban boom and with the desire for authentic conversation, why is it so many important topics are still hashed out behind screens? Should that even be considered conversation? Or is it noise? What then is the setting for authentic public discourse? This is a setting that not long ago belonged in the wheelhouse of Christian institutions. It is a setting that desperately needs to be reclaimed before it is completely taken over by other voices. Millennials are waiting and looking for someone to be the voice of authentic public discourse in uncertain times.

At the root of many of the deep trends in Christian institutions today (both those discussed here and others in Jones’ work) are the issues of complexity and uncertainty. More and more people and organizations are literally and figuratively linked through technology. This means there are increasing intersections of deep trends and all the more potential for wicked problems. Conventional, linear solutions are not adequate. If they were, the problems we have today would not have developed from tame to wicked. And even before we look to solutions, we need a better way to understand the problems, their stakeholders, and how each of these impacts potential solutions. Strong Christian
institutional leaders validate the presence of the uncertainty and complexity lurking in deep trends and their intersections. In this way, they can proceed carefully and begin their work by seeking to better understand the wicked problems they face.

In chapter two, the focus turns to defining wicked problems and exploring the ways they are approached and solutions are generated. Defining a problem as “wicked” helps stakeholders get a handle on the idea that the problem will require not only a specific and nontraditional kind of leadership, but also necessitates open-mindedness to new ways of thinking, understanding and engaging community. The hope is that with tools to understand how to read and approach them, wicked problems will become less daunting. As will become apparent, tackling the wicked problems couched in the intersections of the deep trends facing Christian institutions is not optional. The price for ignoring them is too great. Returning to Jen Hatmaker’s comments at the beginning of this chapter, “these are our kids.” Even in the midst of our problems’ messiness and complexity, hope and persistent patience must carry the faithful forward because the worst possible choice in the face of wicked problems is to do nothing at all.

Chapter Three explores Roger Martin’s theory of the opposable mind which gives rise to the practice of integrative thinking. The habits and practices of integrative thinking offer Christian institutional leaders ways to see beyond binary choices often associated with wicked problems and other institutional challenges. Martin’s most helpful contribution to Christian institutions is an exercise in which he invites participants to “fall in love” with opposing models. This exercise opens up conversations to empathy and values, topics about which the church has much to contribute.
Chapter Four takes on the comedic act of improvisation as a practice which encourages individuals and institutions to draw on a foundation of experience, scholarship and tradition to then trust an ensemble of colleagues to face uncertainty without fear. Providing space for experimentation, risk and failure with survivable consequences are critical acts of faith Christian institutions are poised to offer. Much as some assume ministers are born spiritual, some assume improvisers are born funny. In both cases, years are spent honing one’s craft to be able to create and innovate in any setting because of their solid tradition of training and experience.

Chapter Five pulls together some of the common themes of improvisation and integrative thinking as interdisciplinary tools applicable in generating creative and dynamic solutions to some of the wicked problems facing Christian institutions today. It highlights a few of the most hopeful practices for institutions as the deep trends grow, and intersect. These habits and practices cultivate the conditions for strong leadership principles like traditioned innovation to flourish. The chapter concludes with some hopes for tomorrow and a brighter future for those working so diligently in furthering the work of the reign of God on earth.

Now, we move to innovation and the path set before us. After briefly examining the current landscape of Christian institutions and the deep trends affecting them, naming wicked problems for the complex and dynamic beasts they are sets up a desperate need for innovation in the church. Integrative thinking and improvisation will be offered as interdisciplinary frameworks from which habits and practices can help Christian institutions create the conditions for traditioned innovation and human flourishing. The
interlude which follows, a sort of Chapter 1.5 brings traditioned innovation to the forefront of the conversation since it is one of the ultimate practices of strong Christian leadership and institutional flourishing.
Chapter 1.5: Traditioned Innovation

Christian institutions are called to innovate within the deep trends, and as we shall see in the next chapter, within the wicked problems and other institutional issues that pose new and complex challenges to both the mission and the models of institutions. This call to “innovate” warrants some definition and explanation for the word choice. Terms like “social innovation” or “social entrepreneurship” are rising in popularity as traditional institutions downsize and new benevolent social structures emerge. Entrepreneurship is often associated with something completely new such as a start-up company or designing and creating a new entity. Innovation is a larger more inclusive “umbrella” of creation. Innovation includes both creating something new and the redesign, re-creation and renewal of a better solution for any challenge from a well-known need or a newly articulated task. This work will primarily employ the more inclusive term “innovation” because of the underlying assumption that God is the original innovator and creation is the original innovation.

Given the reputation earned by many Christian churches and institutions of being or becoming ancient, irrelevant and out of touch, there are not surprisingly movements throughout the ecology with names like “Fresh Expressions,” “Awakenings,” “Hope Springs” and “Rise” among many others. These new forms of worship and gathering have names insinuating God is doing something new within their circles. The intention is to attract those who are looking for something more contemporary than the average denominational community. Certainly the leadership of these new forms of Christian gathering are doing something new, originating from that which is very old.
“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) The beginning of Genesis proclaims God as the true innovator and creation as the true innovation. God creates out of nothing, thus everything humankind does after creation is rooted in the “tradition” of God’s innovation of creation. Kavin Rowe writes, “The attempt at ‘pure innovation,’ the doing away with all tradition, is ultimately an inhuman and impossible endeavor, one that shapes its practitioners and victims alike into something far less than human beings were created to be.”¹ Yet this impossibility does not keep humans from trying to create something (they believe to be) totally new. On the contrary, efforts at innovation alone can reaffirm those who wish to live according to tradition alone. Neither of these mindsets are healthy for God’s creation steeped in beautiful and rich tradition and brimming with creative innovation, all of which is Holy Spirit-inspired.

As creatures of habit, humans need some connection to the past, be it rituals, habits, tradition or a story. Something must serve as a foundation for change. Change for change’s sake often results in chaos and confusion. Tradition can serve as a foundation for innovation and change or it can be an anchor dragging down hope and vitality into the dark depths of “we have never done it that way before.” Traditionalism is being stuck in the past, typically clinging so tightly to everything in fear of innovators changing anything. Traditionalism is how our churches earned the reputation for being ancient, out

of touch and irrelevant. Certainly a common ground exists between the two. How might tradition and innovation be held in tension to discern a faithful way forward?

“Traditioned innovation is a way of thinking and living that points toward the future in light of the past, a habit of being that requires both a deep fidelity to the tradition that has borne us to the present and a radical openness to the innovations that will carry us forward.”\(^2\) It is the embodiment of the way today’s Christians live out the ancient words of the scriptures. Traditioned innovation is the way humans are co-creators with God because God created first. And it is the ultimate embodiment of interdisciplinary habits and practices like those found in integrative thinking and improvisation. Strong Christian leaders hold in tension the desire for innovation and imagination in the ways God is leading alongside the best of the faithful tradition of God’s people. Strong Christian leaders help those in their care avoid the painful and hopeless traps of oppositional thinking such as one has to cling to tradition or one who feels a need to change it all. Instead they lead their people in habits and practices of integrative thinking and improvisation to boldly move forward in a spirit of traditioned innovation.

Practicing integrative thinking and improvisation with a mindset of traditioned innovation provides an opportunity to identify the most vibrant and formational parts of one’s traditions and envision them into a future of innovation and possibility. Lovett Weems writes, “Change is not becoming something we never have been before. It is

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\(^2\) Ibid.
becoming more of what we have been.”³ What an affirming and hopeful way to invite people into change. Weems insinuates a job well done and the world’s need for more. And thanks be to God it is not only up to humans to pull the world into traditioned innovation. Revelation 21:5 records, “See, I am making all things new.” God is already at work building upon God’s original innovation in creation.

It may feel daunting to hold more than two thousand years of tradition in integrative tension with the innovative movement of the Holy Spirit in a community of flawed children of God. It is actually an opportunity to put minds at ease for those who are afraid any kind of innovation is going to tarnish their tradition. Strong Christian leaders embrace traditioned innovation by being equally concerned with what ought to be retained from the tradition as they are with what should be changed through innovation. One side of the tension is not favored over the other.⁴ We will learn in Chapter Three, integrative thinking seeks to discern a third (or fourth or fifth) way forward that improves on the positives of either sides of tension.

Traditioned innovation may sound obvious to Christian leaders. It may feel like a name given to that which they have been doing since they followed their calling into ministry. At the same time it can feel threatening to others. Those in favor of all things new can feel trapped and held back by remnants of tradition. Those who passionately love their past and root their faith within it may feel abandoned by anything new. Strong


Christian leaders invite their followers to bring forward the most vibrant parts of their past- that which roots them and gives them hope. All the best of tradition will come forward as God faithfully continues to work new things among God’s people.

Much like habits and practices of integrative thinking and improvisation are not the solutions to all decision making, traditioned innovation is not the only way God moves forward in a community. Traditioned innovation is not suited for institutions merely offering lip service to embracing the tensions of tradition and innovation. Many organizations say they want to innovate and “think outside of the box” but not if it means returning to that which is old for inspiration and a foundation on which to stand. Many institutions are more inclined to avoid the hard work of bringing forward the best of one’s tradition and innovating within it and instead simply rely on what has worked in the past. However reflections on the past are only useful to inspire and strengthen ways to move forward. Strong Christian institutional leaders know integrative thinking, improvisation and traditioned innovation are journeys of discernment not destinations.
Chapter Two: Wicked Problems

Wicked problems have earned their unfortunate name designation with good reasons. Wicked problems are problems without definitive solutions. They are tangled messes of stakeholders, investments, beneficiaries and values. Potential solutions or adaptations in any direction results in changes in another area of a wicked problem. This does not mean, however, that institutions are forever held hostage to these tangled webs of complexity and uncertainty. There is hope to be cultivated in interdisciplinary habits and practices that create space for practices such as traditioned innovation to flourish even in the mess of wicked problems. This chapter will develop a more robust description of wicked problems as well as suggestions for how to innovate, improvise and think integratively within them.

Wicked problems are not new. Poverty, pollution, healthcare and epidemics, just to name a few, have always plagued humanity albeit in varying degrees of wickedness. However, today wicked problems are growing in number and quickly cross-pollinating traditional silos of industries and organizations, increasing the mess of complexity in which they thrive. In Chapter One, I noted the ways Christianity has survived and sometimes thrived through the timeline of the Agrarian, the Industrial and now the Information Age. Wicked problems in particular, have grown in number and complexity in the context of a parallel timeline: the Age of Science into the Age of Design. According to Jeff Conklin, who has developed a helpful framework for conceptualizing wicked problems, their growth in both number and scale can be attributed to a paradigm shift in the way contemporary leaders approach, understand and solve problems.
The Age of Science favored control and predictability. Facts directed priorities, decisions and actions. Simplifying problems was key to solving them. There was often a clear right answer. Conklin explains, “the problems to which organizations devoted themselves were generally ‘tame’ ones: they may have been complicated and involved hundreds of people and years of effort, but the problems themselves were not wicked.”

As quickly as a problem could be defined and the stakeholders identified, decision makers used rational deduction to identify optimum solutions to individual problems.

Communication was linear, as was the leadership hierarchy. Even the emergence of the assembly line in factories points to the direct, simplified and predictable nature of the Age of Science.

The expectations of employees in this age were clear. Workers did their jobs according to the instructions given because their supervisors and those higher in the leadership chain laid out the right answers, the most efficient path, and each individual’s contribution to produce the expected outcome. Henry Ford is recorded as complaining in this era that every time he asked for a pair of hands, they came with a brain attached.

Thinking autonomously on an assembly line is often less than helpful, can be dangerous, and it can impede progress and success. In the Age of Science, success was achieved

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2 Stakeholders will serve as a broad and inclusive term for all those who believe themselves to have an investment in the wicked problem at hand. This can included members of a church or organization, providers or recipients of a service offered by an institution, board members, staff, volunteers and others who feel they contribute to or benefit from the overall mission, vision and values of a Christian institution.


when the problem disappeared or was no longer an issue because of the implementation of such an effective solution.

This is one of the reasons, Conklin says, wicked problems seem to have snuck up on today’s leaders and problem solvers. It appeared everything was working according to the plans neatly laid out by those in charge. Seemingly out of nowhere, the old solutions no longer worked and fingers started pointing. Wicked problems can take leaders by surprise and create chaos because “in times of stress, the natural human tendency is to find fault with others. If we step back and take a systemic view, we can see that the issue is not whose fault the mess is—the issue is our collective failure to recognize the recurring and inevitable dynamics of the mess.”

The “mess” is a key trait in the emerging paradigm, the Age of Design. In this age, leaders are being taught not to “tidy up” a complex mess as was expected in the Age of Science, but to expand their horizons of thought and engagement and allow their learning process to get messy and complex. These leaders are emerging with different mindsets, traits and habits in comparison to those of the Age of Science. Prediction and control are replaced by uncertainty and dynamic complexity. Posing possible future states occurs more frequently than do assessments of current states with a residual eye to what used to be. What was once a linear diagram connecting points along a predetermined path is now only one of many intersecting lines forming more web-like systems and structures. Previously favored individual work now leans towards group process and social interdependence. Meaning and definition emerge from stories, and facts are questioned.

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for what they represent and how they were obtained. Rushing to solutions is replaced by deeply understanding models and problems. And, possible solutions occur in multiples because each stakeholder in a problem views it with different priorities and values. Growing social complexity adds to the influence and outreach of wicked problems, adding to the “mess” of this paradigm.

Wicked problems demand to be understood, especially in their constantly morphing and messy nature. Therefore, the skills, knowledge, facts and predictability that were so important in the Age of Science are relevant but no longer sufficient. As we explore characteristics and approaches to wicked problems, it will become apparent that Christian institutions need dynamic and interdisciplinary habits and practices to create the conditions for innovation and generative solutions. These habits and practices can help institutions shift mindsets away from explanations and absolutes to re-creation and possibility.

In 1973 when Horst Rittle and Melvin Webber first articulated wicked problems, they described ten characteristics to identify them. In the refining process and usage of their concept, the characteristics have been reinterpreted and whittled down to a more manageable five. John Camillus records a simplification of the original characteristics which offers a more user-friendly and implementable conversation tool when working with wicked problems.

1. The perceived problem is difficult to define and substantially without precedent.

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6 Ibid.

2. There are multiple, significant stakeholders with conflicting values and priorities who are affected by the perceived problem and responses to it.
3. There are many apparent causes of the perceived problem, and they are inextricably tangled.
4. It is not possible to be sure when you have the correct or best solution; there is no ‘stopping’ rule.
5. The understanding of what the problem is changes when reviewed in the context of alternative proposed solutions.\(^8\)

Today’s wicked problems continue to weave themselves into even more systemic webs in an already intimately linked and dynamic world. Rittel and Webber’s original work informs much of the details in the following descriptions of Camillus’ manageable and condensed version of their work.

The perceived problem is difficult to define and substantially without precedent.

Wicked problems are challenging to define because the information needed to understand the problem is dependent upon possible solutions. Rittel and Webber explain, “…in order to describe a wicked problem in sufficient detail, one has to develop an exhaustive inventory of all conceivable solutions ahead of time. The reason is that every question asking for additional information depends upon the understanding of the problem—and its resolution—at that time.”\(^9\) The digital revolution trend is a helpful example here. The lack of precedence complicates the wicked problem because the history of solutions are traditionally linear, over-simplified, and clearly, did not solve the problem, hence its development into the wicked category.

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There are multiple, significant stakeholders with conflicting values and priorities who are affected by the perceived problem and responses to it. The way a problem is explained and explored is uniquely related to the attitude and stance of the describer.

“People choose those explanations which are most plausible to them. Somewhat but not much exaggerated, you might say that everybody picks that explanation of a discrepancy which fits his intentions best and which conforms to the action-prospects that are available to him.”\textsuperscript{10} While diversity of opinions and priorities bring depth to a problem’s understanding, they also have a multiplying effect on its complexity and the emotional investment around the issue. Rittel and Webber explain, “our point, rather, is that diverse values are held by different groups of individuals -- that what satisfies one may be abhorrent to another, that what comprises problem solution for one is problem-generation for another.”\textsuperscript{11} Eager and invested stakeholders can find themselves frustrated when working toward generative solutions and “answers” do not appear as absolutes, as right or wrong. For committed stakeholders, this is disheartening and frustrating, especially for those accustomed to quick and easily discerned solutions. Investment, as aforementioned diversity, brings both advantages and challenges to the work of wicked problems.

There are many apparent causes of the perceived problem, and they are inextricably tangled. Here, much of Rittel and Webber’s original claims of wicked problems surface. They write,

Problems can be described as discrepancies between the state of affairs as it is and the state as it ought to be. The process of resolving the problem starts with the

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
search for causal explanation of the discrepancy. Removal of that cause poses another problem of which the original problem is a ‘symptom.’ In turn, it can be considered the symptom of still another, ‘higher level’ problem. …The higher the level of a problem’s formation, the broader and more general it becomes: and the more difficult it becomes to do something about it. On the other hand, one should not try to cure symptoms: and therefore one should try to settle the problem on as high a level as possible.

Here lies a difficulty with incrementalism, as well. This doctrine advertises a policy of small steps, in the hope of contributing systematically to overall improvement. If, however, the problem is attacked on too low a level (an increment), then success of resolution may result in making things worse, because it may become more difficult to deal with the higher problems. Marginal improvement does not guarantee overall improvement.12

Herein lies one of the clearest links between wicked problems as a construct and both the integrative thinking process and the practice of improvisation. Toggling between understanding the problem as it is and as it ought to be begs for practices inherent within integrative thinking and improvisation to help stakeholders move beyond feeling stuck. While forward movement may be marginal, if any, awareness and commitment to a resolution process is critical given that improvements in a system, which in turn alter the problem, can make wicked problems feel hopeless and impossible.

*It is not possible to be sure when you have the correct or best solution; there is no ‘stopping’ rule.* One of the keys to understanding a problem with interconnected solutions is to not expect a linear beginning and ending as in traditional problem solving. Images of concentric circles or a web with multiple nodes of connection are more representative of wicked problems. While there may be causal links that seem to follow a pattern, the links will eventually intersect because of the open system nature of wicked

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12 Ibid.
problems. One does not stop work toward a resolution to a wicked problem because the right answers are found or an understanding is articulated. More likely, time, money, energy or patience runs out; or out of exasperation, the decision is made to settle for “good enough.” A pause for an experimental “generative solution” rather than a stopping point is a more appropriate goal than completion of the process. A stop is an absolute; a pause notes the pending continuation of problem understanding and solution generation for wicked problems.

The understanding of what the problem is changes when reviewed in the context of alternative proposed solutions. This particular characteristic of wicked problems is best described with English colloquialisms. Phrases like “you are damned if you do and damned if you don’t” and “you can’t win for losing” bear witness to this difficult characteristic. Rittel and Webber write,

> With wicked [planning] problems, however, every implemented solution is consequential. It leaves ‘traces’ that cannot be undone. … Whenever actions are effectively irreversible and whenever the half-lives of the consequences are long, every trial counts. And every attempt to reverse a decision or to correct for the undesired consequences poses another set of wicked problems, which are in turn subject to the same dilemmas.

While “being stuck between a rock and a hard place” may feel confining for those in the mess of a wicked problem, hope can surface in knowing Christian institutions are not left to their own measures in generating solutions. Despite the unintended, undesirable conditions we create, the Holy Spirit continues to be at work, most clearly in the messy places of our lives.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
Human instincts persist that messes can be cleaned up and problems can be solved. But Webber and Rittel continue, “The formulation of a wicked problem is the problem! The process of formulating the problem and of conceiving a solution (or re-solution) are identical, since every specification of the problem is a specification of the direction in which a treatment is considered.” Problems possessing these characteristics cannot be solved by traditional methods, because as previously mentioned, traditional methods require a clear and accepted problem definition. Lacking a problem definition denies the possibility for shared understanding or possible resolutions or experiments.

The work Jones is doing in the identification of deep trends in Christian institutions, described in chapter one, is mirrored in other fields, not only because wicked problems cross disciplinary and institutional lines, but also because of their consistent underlying theme of social complexity. Returning to Jeff Conklin’s framework for wicked problems, he asserts that social complexity and wicked problems are “the two most intense forces impacting organizations today.” While the trends may not carry the

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15 Ibid.


17 According to the Center for Social Complexity at George Mason University, “Social complexity is the study of the phenomena of human existence – emigration patterns, armed conflicts, political movements, marriage practices, natural disasters, etc – and the many possible arrangements of relationships between those discrete phenomena. Social complexity reflects human behavior as it is exercised in ongoing and increasingly broader and more complicated circumstances of individual and group existence. Social complexity has emerged as the conceptual and practical framework wherein these phenomena and their relationships can be studied. "What is Social Complexity." 9 March 2016. The Center for Social Complexity at George Mason University. http://socialcomplexity.gmu.edu/what-is-social-complexity. 18 November 2015.

same names, the themes of wicked problems and social complexity are ever mounting challenges in institutions regardless of their secular or sacred leanings.

Often limited to a particular issue such as the influence of technology, birth rates, or a sociological study, “social complexity” is more centrally a helpful inclusive term for the study of the increasingly broadening and deepening connections and relationships within human existence. Social complexity, as a construct, provides a way to talk about how the web of systems of humans, communities, organizations, and other forms of gathering connect and intersect in the world. If viewed in the negative, social complexity can be its own wicked problem. It infiltrates all of Jones’ deep trends, making the world feel as if it is both expanding and shrinking at the same time.

What then is the appropriate response to the deep trends facing Christian (and other) institutions? How does one help their institutions understand wicked problems and the dense undercurrent of social complexity beneath it all? How do strong Christian leaders proceed? What is the faithful way forward?

Because of the complexity of wicked problems, dynamic, organic and interdisciplinary practices that create the conditions for innovation and safe experimentation are the best approach to both understanding wicked problems and developing generative solutions. These practices take significant investments of resources and often demand a shift in long-held mindsets. For these reasons, many institutions fall into traditional half-hearted efforts and default patterns which feel familiar and may have produced success in the past. We will review these types of efforts and the reasons they are ineffective in understanding and working toward solutions to wicked problems. Often when headed into a process filled with complexity and uncertainty, knowing what to
*avoid* and what *does not work* can be critical components as an institution discerns a faithful path forward.

Default habits and patterns of behavior are often well-honed and deeply familiar practices within the repertoire of human responses and reactions to uncertainty and complexity. These habits and patterns can lead problem solvers to coping mechanisms when particularly wicked issues arise. In particular, there are two habits and two coping mechanisms which tend to arise most quickly and often. The habits institutions often fall into are leaping to conclusions and settling for good enough. The coping mechanisms which are among the most common responses to wicked problems are studying the problem and taming it.

Our education system and leadership development structures traditionally teach efficient problem identification and resolution implementation. Teachers espouse that one’s first instinct is typically the right answer. Leaping to possible conclusions is rooted in a “quicker the better” mentality. It is also a deeply imbedded instinct that, in it is earliest and most basic form, kept our ancient ancestors from getting eaten by prey. The quickly drawn conclusion rarely births an elegant solution to a complex problem because immediate responses do not result from a process of observation and shared understanding. Leaping to conclusions ignores deeper hidden causes of the problem enabling it to become that much more wicked. ¹⁹

Yet another default habit which arises with wicked problems is the tendency to settle for “good enough,” opting for whatever seems to expeditiously meet the minimum

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requirement needed to move closer to achieving a given goal. The human brain rationalizes that the optimal solution is too difficult to discern, not worth the effort involved, or simply unnecessary because a “good enough” solution has been found. But this default pattern begs an interesting series of questions: *What is a satisfying answer? What answer is good enough? What is the best answer?* These questions are rarely considered because the question *What should we do?* is posed before asking *What is possible?* Success is too often tied to quickly designed solutions that are rarely optimal ones. However an optimal answer to a question can often be discerned if the question is considered more deeply and the problem reviewed from multiple alternative and interdisciplinary perspectives and practices.

A common corporate phrase indicating a leader is about to insist on studying and taming a wicked problem is “Let’s work to get our arms around this issue.” This means learn all that can be learned from every angle and then control it within the circumference of the team’s arms. It can be a helpful image to work from with arms extended alluding to teamwork, hugging or working closely together, but what happens if the arms fail to reach each other?

While studying a problem is a natural instinct and important, it is an approach that will collapse quickly if the problem is wicked. Merely studying a problem leads to procrastination because little can be learned about a wicked problem by objective data gathering and analysis. “Wicked problems demand an opportunity-driven approach: they require making decisions, doing experiments, launching pilot programs, testing

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20 Ibid.
prototypes and so on. Sometimes you can study something so long that the strategy you develop is out of date when it comes to implementation.”

Some Christian institutions will use the guise of “studying” a problem and send it through the red tape of a highly bureaucratic process of committees and meetings. This avoidance mechanism is meant to bury an unappealing issue so that it becomes so lost in committee meetings that it never resurfaces.

Taming a wicked problem is another common default posture for coping with uncertainty and complexity. Instead of embracing the full wickedness of the problem, simplification becomes the ultimate goal to make it more manageable and solvable. Using simplification to tame a wicked problem involves developing a description of a related problem that has been solved, declaring their similarity, often ignoring contrary evidence, and specifying the parameters by which to measure success. Organizations familiar with this method of taming a problem will have heard “We have done this before, we can do it again” as an affirmation of predetermined success. Sometimes taming a problem is the path of least resistance. Employees will give up trying to find a good solution and instead, follow orders, do the job, and stay out of trouble. But perhaps the most destructive way to attempt to tame a wicked problem is by declaring there are only a few possible solutions and focusing on selecting among them. The destruction lies in framing the problem with a binary “either/or” solution.

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22 Ibid.
Jeff Conklin asserts that attempting to tame a wicked problem will always fail in the long run. The wickedness will always reassert itself, perhaps with different symptoms or contributors, but it will nonetheless resurface as if the attempt at taming never even occurred. Making it worse, the acts or “solutions” of the taming process exacerbate the wicked problem, reinforcing the fifth characteristic of wicked problems: *The understanding of what the problem is changes when reviewed in the context of alternative proposed solutions.*

What then is an institution wrought with wicked problems to do? The deep trends only point to some of the mounting issues among Christian institutions. More are hidden and waiting to reveal their wicked messiness. John Camillus asserts that rather than studying or attempting to tame wicked problems, *managing* wickedness is the best strategy for institutions to learn to cope with wicked problems and innovate within them. He suggests that the simplest techniques are often the best. Among his suggestions are ideas about creating a shared understanding among stakeholders, defining the institutional identity, focusing on action and feed-forward techniques. While each of these techniques have their merits, Camillus’ feed-forward technique is the most promising. Its practices and vision also connect well to Chapter Three on integrative thinking and Chapter Four on improvisation.

Creating a shared understanding of a wicked problem might seem like an obvious managing technique, but it is often overlooked. False assumptions that stakeholders share a common understanding of the problem can quickly deter solution-generating processes. The goal of this managing technique is, according to Camillus,  

23 Ibid.
to document opinions and communicate: the aim should be to create a shared understanding of the problem and foster a joint commitment to possible ways of resolving it. Not everyone will agree on what the problem is, but stakeholders should be able to understand one another’s positions well enough to discuss different interpretations of the problem and work together to tackle it. You must go beyond obtaining facts and opinions from stakeholders and also involve them in finding ways to manage the problem. Involving more stakeholders makes the planning process more complex, but it also expands the potential for creativity.24

Unfortunately, this is where most institutions fail with wicked problems. Shared understanding among stakeholders takes time, observation, patience and empathy. When a wicked problem surfaces in an institution, it often does so in the face of a crisis when it is assumed there is little time for such practices.25

While an organization facing a wicked problem will experiment with many strategies, it must stay true to an over-arching sense of purpose rooted in the institutional identity. Honing in on an institution’s vision, values and mission can bring not only shared understanding but also a shared sense of direction and unity for all stakeholders. Other institutional identity conversations worth pursuing are those around competencies and aspirations. What does the institution do better than others? What needs is it meeting? Where are the gaps left to fill? How does the institution envision success and how will it know when it has achieved it? What are the benchmarks? A clear and widely-


25 This managing technique references one of Roger Martin’s themes in integrative thinking. Leaders must become comfortable wading into “the mess” of a wicked problem in order to fully experience the wickedness at play. Appreciation for a mess in any field is often difficult to come by, even though it is a skill which reaps significant rewards of vision and insights unavailable to those who demand a mess be quickly tidied up.
embraced institutional identity provides direction and focuses attention on opportunities and challenges.\textsuperscript{26}

Once an institutional direction is clear, a focus on action can be a productive pathway in managing a wicked problem. Camillus suggests that institutional leaders follow the actions of legislative policy makers. Bureaucrats, he writes, focus on the few actions they will be able to take rather than the myriad of options before them. Doing so enables them to analyze options quickly and make decisions that meet the goals of several constituents. Referred to as ‘the science of muddling through,’ over time, governments make progress by constantly making small policy changes.\textsuperscript{27}

Likewise, Christian institutions can determine in which sectors of a wicked problem they can have the most influence. Admittedly, this reads contrary to the aforementioned characteristic of a wicked problem, \textit{The understanding of what the problem is changes when reviewed in the context of alternative proposed solutions}. However, strategically planned actions born out of sincere observation, shared understanding and empathy for the complexity and uncertainty of the wicked problem is a more helpful and proactive path than remaining paralyzed and overwhelmed into doing nothing. This is when innovative institutions embrace risk and launch experiments and pilot programs to learn from both successes and failures. Keen observation skills remain critical when experimenting so that an effort to make progress in one area of a wicked problem does not create a greater or irreparable strain in another. Focusing on taking some kind of

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
strategic action in managing a wicked problem leads to Camillus’ most helpful managing technique: feed-forward strategies.

Camillus advises experimenting with a feed-forward, as opposed to the traditional feed-back, orientation. Feedback can help understand past solution attempts, but wicked problems require new, creative, collaborative and generative solutions. 28 A helpful image Camillus offers is from television and movie examples: “Feedback helps people learn in contexts such as the movie Groundhog Day—same set of circumstances every day. Wicked problems come from circumstances like those in Quantum Leap where you are in a different place and time each episode.”29

Feed-forward techniques encourage leaders to work backwards from an anticipated future, which can often be dreamed up by the leaders and institutions themselves.30 Once a set of envisioned external and internal circumstances are articulated for the institution in the next ten, twenty, or fifty years, a shared understanding of the range of possibilities for the future can be developed. Then, strategies can be pursued to increase the likelihood of bringing the dreamed future to reality. Actions are taken and choices are made without relying on the past and are replaced by a possible future of hope.31

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Camillus helpfully refers to this as “chaotic ambiguity- when there is a complete lack of clarity about what the future may be like, so that ‘the best way to predict the future is to create it’ applies and ‘transformational’ or ‘visionary’ scenario approaches are the only way to go. Such an approach essentially defines the vision of what and where the organization wishes to be and identifies the enablers that will help it realize its vision.” Camillus, "Feed-Forward Systems," 53-59.
31 In his “Strategy as Wicked Problems,” Camillus writes that feed-forward techniques can still complement feedback practices in an institution inasmuch as they help envision a future.
The managing technique of feed-forward thinking is a helpful and proactive challenge for leading an institution in addressing a wicked problem. Defaulting back to basing decisions on feedback is tempting, natural and comfortable, therefore a helpful dichotomy of the differences is listed below. Ultimately feed-forward actions encourage strategic experimentation with a “practice and priority to analyze difficulties and ‘failures,’ learning from them and moving forward toward a future with hope.

Before moving on, it bears noting that some might wonder why technology is not suggested as a potential solution or at least a contributor to a solution of some of today’s wicked problems. Others will argue that technology creates its own set of wicked problems. However, in his book *Humans are Underrated*, Geoff Colvin writes of the growing fear that the expansion and expertise of computers and technology will eventually negate the need for humanity. In doing so, Colvin actually confines the abilities and influence of technology and reaffirms the significance of truly human attributes in solving wicked problems. It is actually because of the growing expertise and

32 While similar planning and control techniques may be employed in feedback as well as in feed-forward approaches, there are profound differences in the two: Feedback is basically an exercise in remediation, correcting, learning and improving performance in an existing business. Feed-forwarding focuses on fashioning a future- a future that is unrelated to the past. Feedback essentially involves performance appraisal and learning. Feed-forward focuses on managing uncertainty and an unknowable future. Feedback continuously improves managerial decision making by advancing the understanding of cause-effect relationships. Feed-forward involves taking a leap of faith, committing to a belief in a cause-effect relationship in order to make strategic decisions and allocate resources. Feedback-oriented systems engage in episodic reviews of performance at specified intervals of time (ie quarterly). Feed-forward oriented systems trigger analysis whenever assumptions that have been made appear to be mistaken or new issues are spotted. Feedback employs databases that collect historical data. Feed-forward works with information derived from possible future scenarios.


specialization of computers that truly human skills are becoming more and more valuable in the world today. Computers can address increasing numbers of our technical needs, therefore it is our “soft skills” which make the difference in leadership. More than any other leadership traits, corporations are seeking leaders who connect with other people, have keen observation skills, and develop and nurture a shared understanding of the corporate culture. And as should be no surprise to the Christian institutional leader, the distinctly human skill that is the most sought after among leaders is empathy. The ability to observe and understand how a person is feeling and respond appropriately is what the world is craving in the face of wicked problems.

Observation and empathy are two of the primary contributors to the creation of generative solutions to wicked problems. Generative solutions are solutions created while working on a problem. “Building a plane while flying at thirty thousand feet” is an example of a generative solution. The process has pieces of each of the aforementioned managing techniques. A shared understanding of stakeholders gives leaders the most extensive vision of the problem possible. Solutions rooted in an institution’s mission, vision and values will not stray so far from the institution’s identity that it makes the problem worse. A focus on action enables generative solutions to make adjustments along the way and correct missteps in real time. And feedforward techniques invite leaders to act and lead in response to a Holy Spirit-inspired and community-supported future state.

Leaders committed to finding generative solutions to wicked problems cannot be dismayed by failure since realistically more generative solutions fail than succeed. But that is part of the beauty of generative solutions, they are survivable failures. Generative
solutions test various strategies that address different angles of wicked problems. This kind of solution is an experiment in one area while the entire problem is being monitored so that adjustments and adaptations can be made before repercussions reach irreparable levels. At the same time, it means successes from generative solutions can be scaled for maximum impact. Creating generative solutions is an iterative process in need of both pauses for redirection, adaptation and open-mindedness to where the Holy Spirit might be moving in a community.

At their core, generative solutions require cultivating distinctly human skills such as empathy and observation. Wicked problems, at their core, are about deeply held human values and so their solutions must require dynamic integrations of human skills and virtues. Observation and empathy help leaders develop, and hopefully maintain, a holistic grasp on wicked problems and nurture generative solutions that work toward human flourishing and foretastes of the reign of God.

Observation, much like aforementioned shared understanding, requires an investment of time and it is often a significantly underrated skill for those exploring wicked problems. The skills of observation are ones like those of a cultural anthropologist, someone who comparatively studies human societies and cultures and their development. Specifically, a cultural anthropologist may observe social structure, laws, relational interactions or traditions. With this lens, one is able to immerse themselves in a culture more fully and gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the problems and opportunities within. Cultural anthropology becomes
all the more important with wicked problems affected by both local and global influences.\textsuperscript{34}

Cultural anthropologist, Christian pastor and disruptive innovator, Marlon Hall\textsuperscript{35} asserts that the observation of a cultural anthropologist is not a passive act, but an active and intentional immersion into a culture. He looks for trends or visual tendencies which lead to truths and transcendent human realities about meaning, function and significance. Hall says, “Anthropology is a social science; it is an interrogative journey through the what’s, who’s, where’s, and how’s of a culture to discover the core, why.”\textsuperscript{36} These inquiries and discoveries within observation are also those of strong Christian leaders who help their people flourish within their God-given meaning, function and significance. In light of the deep trend of the lure of cities discussed in Chapter One, observation is a key activity to keep up with how cultures and institutions are interacting and relationships are or are not forming as the cities sprawl.

The skill of observation is often overlooked and undervalued; urban designer Ben Hamilton-Bailie draws attention to this when he says, “Most of what we accept as ‘the proper order of things’ is based on assumptions, not observations. If we observed first and designed second, we wouldn’t need most of the things we build.”\textsuperscript{37} This should strike fear in the hearts and minds (and annual budgets) of Christians as it is an announcement

\textsuperscript{34} Nagji, Bansi and Helen Walters. "Help Wanted 2.0: Engaging Others to Tackle Wicked Problems." \textit{Rotman Magazine} Spring 2012: 73-76.

\textsuperscript{35} Reverend Hall actually identifies himself as a “radical anthropologically rooted missionary pastor.” Hall, Marlon. Cultural Anthropology, Victoria Atkinson White. 1 December 2015.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} As recorded in May, Matthew E. "Observe First: Design Second." \textit{Rotman Magazine} Spring 2012: 40-46.
that the Church has not been paying attention and perhaps even designing programs, buildings, strategic plans, etc., unnecessarily. Somehow the assumption has surfaced that innovation has to be difficult and successful solutions are only discovered after a laborious and extensive research and development process. Effective observation can prove the opposite. Sometimes observation can help institutions be faithful stewards of their precious resources. As one CEO said, “solutions to many of the world’s most difficult social problems don’t need to be invented, they need only to be found, funded and scaled.”

Observing, then adapting successful practices in authentic and individually conceptualized ways is good stewardship of resources of time, money and energy.

The skills of observation can enable those called to be good stewards of God’s resources do even more with the abundance God has entrusted to us. Christian institutions are called to consider how energy, time and money might go into other and equally important work of the Church. Observation is a generative and iterative process in working with wicked problems. It is a step toward innovation within existing structures in need of renewal and fresh ideas as opposed to the truly extensive and laborious work of recreating institutions from scratch.

While observation and empathy have always been key skills for effective leaders, these skills increase in their significance particularly with the rise of social complexity and the digital revolution. Observation is a critical skill as social complexity spans to new and messier areas of life. And within the digital revolution, as technology consumes more and more of what was previously life-sustaining employment for the working class, it is

also changing the way humans relate to one another. Because technology is driving the change in communication among humans, effective human communication and relational skills like empathy will become all the more valuable as technology’s reach expands.

Geoff Colvin declares empathy is the critical 21st century skill. He says, “empathy will be the difference between good and great.”\(^{39}\) The challenge then is in creating conditions for empathy to grow and flourish because in the developed economies in which we live and work today, highly competitive and capital-driven institutional structures can be increasingly hostile to empathy and some go so far as to see it as a weakness to be stamped out.\(^{40}\)

The technology-linked nature of our lives has allowed some of humanity’s most valuable assets to be seemingly stolen out from under us. A social network now means an online community of friends, links, likes, swipes and fellow tweeters. Colvin explains that this form of social networks is exactly the opposite of the kind of social network the human brain is wired to rely upon.\(^{41}\) He goes on to claim that humans are designed to empathize; empathy is part of our essential nature.\(^{42}\) “Our extraordinary ability to sense

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\(^{40}\) This could be a residual effect of the Age of Science in which individuals were not encouraged to think for themselves and instead were told to follow directions predetermined by their supervisors. It can also be seen as a means to stay competitive by thinking only of one’s self and not getting distracted by the needs of others or how they are affected by decisions you influence.

\(^{41}\) V.S. Ramachandran is leading fascinating research in the field of mirror neurons, or what others are calling empathy neurons. Originally discovered in monkeys, these neurons fire not only when a human performs an action but also when they watch another human perform the exact same action. For further information on what Ramachandran refers to as “the basis for human civilization,” see Ramachandran, V. S. *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Quest for What Makes Us Human*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

\(^{42}\) Colvin, *Humans Are Underrated*, 83.
the feelings and thoughts of others is based on seeing their faces, seeing their body
language, and hearing their voices, none of which are available to us when texting or
using social media… Social media are the enemies of empathy. And they’re winning.”

Empathy will be discussed again within a different framework in Chapter Three in
the context of integrative thinking. For now, the important takeaway is the necessity of
competency and hopefully for some, mastery of the skills of observation and empathy.
Christian institutions have at points in history been curators of empathy and ought to feel
the call and need to be incubators of this critical 21st century skill, both for the betterment
of Christian institutions and for all the world. Christian institutions have a captivated
audience who, according to what Millennials say they desire, want institutions full of
people who are empathetic to others and willing to serve in Christ-like ways in response
to that empathy. Opportunities abound for Christian institutions to exemplify and role
play critical skills of human relationships like empathy and observation. Christian
institutions are effectively placed to lead the way in counter-cultural strides by helping
humans be truly human and express their humanity in culturally uplifting ways that begin
with empathy. In this pathway “we would help create individuals who instinctively cared
what other people felt and thought. Just imagine the possibilities inherent in large groups
of people actively, purposefully, professionally listening to one another. That's the world
we want to live in.”

43 Ibid., 82.

Certainly a world free from wicked problems is an ideal, but as we have seen, the reality is that wicked problems are growing in number and size, morphing and becoming increasingly more wicked. Having multiple options for managing them is helpful, as is knowing what techniques to avoid in our predictable and long standing default patterns. Some, of course, will argue that there are other, more successful approaches to wicked problems or that more time and energy are being poured into them than is necessary. Clearly, wicked problems have no regard for either time or cost. This is why the most effective approach to a wicked problem is one that produces generative solutions, like those which can arise through habits and practices from interdisciplinary efforts such as integrative thinking and improvisation to be discussed in the next two chapters.

Christian institutions today are seeking habits and practices that will help them move out of the Age of Science, and the predictability and control associated with it. This is a challenge because in the Age of Design, complexity is viewed as a positive step toward a more inclusive and holistic vision, even though it can be difficult to feel as if one is making progress toward a generative solution. This is a trying task given the significant shift in mindset it requires. Institutions with adaptable structures, strong institutional identity and a shared understanding among stakeholders will be the ones best equipped to manage even their most wicked problems.

Default patterns loom large and are comfortable methods of resisting the work that must be done with wicked problems. Resisting, attempting to tame or merely studying them are ineffective given their complexity and rapidly changing nature. Certainly best practices from the managing techniques can be adapted for any wicked problem, and implementing a feed-forward mindset seems to most effectively help
leaders cultivate conditions for their stakeholders to see a vision and work toward it with hope.

Because of the constantly morphing nature of wicked problems and the fact that their outcomes and influence cannot be predicted, what becomes crucial to navigating them with social and institutional integrity is an adaptable infrastructure which can withstand constant changes and challenges. Equally critical are the individual and corporate values and practices of shared understanding, observation and empathy that contribute to generative solutions bringing life and renewal to institutions and communities. Much of the work of Christian institutional leaders becomes that of setting strategy for having gifted people work on crucial tasks at the right time toward generative solutions.

Hopefully this chapter has laid a foundation for both the identification of wicked problems and possible paths for managing them. I find when Christian institutional leaders claim the language of wicked problems, it is easier for their institutions to recognize the deep trends of their context, integrate solutions and improvise within their structure and tradition. A wicked problem demands a specific kind of leadership approach, which is critical to solving such problems effectively. Digital technology which offers its own challenges and assets to wicked problems gives reason to pause and cultivate skills distinct to our humanity such as empathy and observation; humans generate solutions to wicked problems, not computers. Finally, the language of wicked problems alerts leaders to the need for constant for tweaking and adaptation to solutions so that they maintain a careful eye on the deep trends affecting their institution and hopefully work ahead of them in the future.
In the next chapter, Roger Martin’s integrative thinking process is offered as a model that offers interdisciplinary habits and practices which can create the conditions for generative solutions and empathetic curiosity to flourish as leaders work toward nurturing their institutions into a deeper and fuller embodiment of the work of Jesus Christ. We will explore opportunities to see beyond the limiting aspects of oppositional thinking that so commonly arise with wicked problems in Christian institutions. Posing binary choices to a wicked problem can be a signal of a lack of faith in a God who created not just birds or fish, but also reptiles, amphibians, mammals and most impressively, humans. Our God is not one of binary choices, but of abundant creativity and possibilities, some of which we are able to discern and steward through practices like integrative thinking.
Chapter 3: Integrative Thinking

A glance at the bookshelves or kindle library of Christian leaders likely reveals the latest accounts of success in the business world. They collect titles such as: *Good to Great*, *Playing to Win*, *The Five Levels of Leadership*, or *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The speed with which these books become bestsellers both in and outside the world of business suggests they make a significant difference in the way organizations and people function. Or is it indicative of something else? Could the prevalence of multiple proposed solutions to a problem indicate that none of them effectively offers a comprehensive answer? Perhaps with bestselling stories of success, readers are looking in the wrong places because of each story’s deeply embedded contextual circumstances. What if instead, success stories were held up as models of what worked, alongside models of what did not work on an organization’s journey to success?

Models are transferable and adaptable. Contexts are much more specific to an industry and slower to change.

Christian leaders often turn to industry achievements, trying to emulate in their own settings what certain corporations appear to have mastered. While there are best practices from the corporate sector that may be applicable in a modified context, Christian institutions do not do what businesses do. Corporations do not typically work

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1 Moving forward, I will borrow Padmore et al work with models: they describe a good model as “one that 1.) captures enough features of the real process that it is unlikely to lead the user astray; 2.) is simple enough for ready comprehension; and 3.) is structured in a way that can lend itself both to generalization and to specialization.” Padmore T., Schuetze H., Gibson H. “Modeling Systems of Innovation: An Enterprise-Centered View.” *Research Policy.* 26, 1998: 605-624. as quoted in O'Raghallaigh, Paidi, David Sammon and Ciaran Murphy. "A Re-Conceptualization of Innovation Models to Support Decision Design." *Journal of Decision Systems Vol. 20* April 2011: 361-382.
toward the same end as Christian institutions. There is, however, a tool Christian institutional leadership can adopt from contemporary business and leadership theory whose habits and practices can provide a framework for developing critical generative solutions. Christian institutional leaders can implement this framework to nurture the kind of innovative and creative thinking needed to create the conditions for developing generative solutions addressing today’s wicked problems.

Certainly business best-sellers have something to offer to leaders as a result of what others have done to become successful in their fields. However, Roger Martin, in *The Opposable Mind*, looks at the success of business leaders through a different lens. In studying the actions of numerous industry leaders, he follows a hunch that a common denominator lies buried beneath what the business gurus did. He analyzed what he calls the “antecedent to action.” Martin sought to understand the cognitive processes industry leaders use to produce their actions. Setting aside the commonly asked question in business and leadership theory, “What should I do?” Martin reframed the search for the secret of success and asked, “How should I think?” A focus on what one should do bypasses possible options and opportunities hidden in a problem before they can be revealed, Martin argues. Much more can be learned when a leader’s thinking is analyzed, critiqued and in some circumstances, emulated.

Martin explored the thought process behind many of the world’s most successful business leaders’ most challenging decisions. While clear thinking patterns emerged,

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interestingly, few of the leaders took the time to reflect on how they made decisions. ³
Martin discerned what he calls “a common operating system… a pattern of reasoning, or
perhaps better, the cognitive discipline”⁴ which enabled the leaders to come to decisions
affecting their business challenges. Martin came to call this process integrative thinking.

Roger Martin may have been the first to name integrative thinking for what it is,
but he gives credit to those who brought light to the concept long before him. F. Scott
Fitzgerald writes, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing
ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. One should, for
example, be able to see that things are hopeless yet be determined to make them
otherwise.”⁵ These words provide Martin’s foundation for The Opposable Mind and his
identification, study, theory and practice of integrative thinking. While the initial sting of
having to maintain a “first-rate intelligence” may seem daunting, Martin assures his
readers his process is worth learning and practicing. His work is rooted in Fitzgerald’s so-
called “test,” thus Martin defines integrative thinkers as those who “have the
predisposition and the capacity to hold two diametrically opposing ideas in their heads.
And then, without panicking or simply settling for one alternative or the other, they’re

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³ Perhaps this could be a generational marker. Given the rising popularity of practices such as coaching and
mindfulness, reflection on one’s thoughts and actions is becoming more standard in the business world.

⁴ Ibid., 21.

February, 1936.)
able to produce a synthesis that is superior to either opposing idea.” Simply put, integrative thinking is a “discipline of consideration and synthesis.”

Fitzgerald claims a first-rate intelligence is a naturally occurring capability limited to those gifted with an above average acumen. However, going back further than Fitzgerald, Martin cites scholar and naturalist Thomas Chamberlin (1890) and his work developing multiple working hypotheses rather than a singular working hypothesis.

In following a single hypothesis, the mind is presumably led to a single explanatory conception. But an adequate explanation often involves the coordination of several agencies, which enter into the combined result in varying proportions. The true explanation is therefore necessarily complex. Such complex explanations of phenomena are specially encouraged by the method of multiple hypotheses, and constitute one of its chief merits.

Chamberlin offers his multiple hypotheses thought process as one of a developmental skill and discipline that can be cultivated even by those lacking a first-rate intellect. According to Chamberlin, the practice of what Martin calls integrative thinking is a capacity within all waiting to be developed to create solutions otherwise not imagined.

Chamberlain writes,

The use of the method leads to certain peculiar habits of mind which deserve passing notice, since as a factor of education its disciplinary value is one of importance. When faithfully pursued for a period of years, it develops a habit of thought analogous to the method itself, which may be designated a habit of parallel or complex thought. Instead of a simple succession of thoughts in linear order, the procedure is complex, and the mind appears to become possessed of the

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6 Ibid., 6.


8 Martin, The Opposable Mind, 22.
power simultaneous vision from different standpoints. Phenomena appear to become capable of being viewed analytically and synthetically at once.⁹

Martin draws upon the resources of Chamberlin, Fitzgerald and others to describe integrative thinking as a not necessarily new, but certainly alternative way to bypass limited and linear binary thinking. For inspiration he quotes Wallace Stevens in the hope integrative thinkers will make “the choice not between, but of.” ¹⁰

Martin’s insistence that there is a way to move past the limiting and often hopeless practice of binary or oppositional thinking is critical to his theory. A first glance at a wicked problem typically produces an either/or solution because of the way the human brain is wired.¹¹ Either/or options are deeply rooted in a “fight or flight” mentality. Returning to the language of Chapter Two, one chooses to either manage the wicked problem, using any number of the proposed techniques, or one chooses to ignore the problem. With either choice, the problems grow much more wicked. Oppositional thinking is a zero-sum game. Everyone loses something and some lose everything. This becomes particularly critical in Christian institutions where the members or benefactors are receiving life-sustaining necessities like food or shelter. Binary decisions in these contexts can be matters of life and death. Integrative thinking provides a way to hold together the advantages of opposing choices, or sometimes, multiple choices without canceling out the advantages of other possibilities.


¹⁰ Martin, "Choices, Conflict, and the Creative Spark."

¹¹ Offering a helpful metaphor, Martin refers to this as the brain’s “factory setting” which is geared toward specialization and simplification.
Confident this kind of thinking is available to everyone, Martin offers the metaphor of “the opposable mind.” He was struck by the similarity of the way those he studied held opposing ideas in tension and the way people use their hands. He built upon the power of the metaphor. The tension created by the opposable thumb and fingers sets humans apart from other creatures with the abilities unknown to those without the advantage of opposable thumbs. And yet, Martin writes, had humans not exploited and refined the use of the tension created by holding the thumb and fingers in opposition, neither the physical nor cognitive properties which accompany the skill would have been developed.

Similarly, we were born with an opposable mind we can use to hold two conflicting ideas in constructive tension. We can use that tension to think our way through to a new and superior idea. … And just as we can develop and refine the skill with which we employ our opposable thumbs to perform tasks that once seemed impossible, I’m convinced we can also, with patient practice, develop the ability to use our opposable minds to unlock solutions to problems that seem to resist every effort to solve them.12

Martin assures readers that with practice and diligence, seemingly hopeless oppositional models will be left behind as progress is made with integrative possibilities.

Once Martin developed a metaphor for and tested his integrative thinking model, he outlined a process by which others can access and exercise their opposable mind and think integratively. For the purpose of this work, and I believe much of the work of Christian institutions, the habits and practices formed from Martin’s insights are more helpful than his frameworks. At the same time, several of his processes create space for

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some poignant questions to rise that add great value to conversations about innovation and change in Christian institutions.

Strong Christian institutions seek habits and practices that cultivate conditions to resist the temptation to make oppositional, zero-sum, no-hope decisions that only exasperate and force wicked problems into deeper complexity. Instead, they faithfully experiment with habits and practices like those found within integrative thinking to produce multiple alternative generative solutions until they discover ones which work specifically within their context and circumstances. When Christian values that distinguish Christian institutions from business or secular organizations (faith, hope, empathy, love of God and neighbor) are also held in tension in the experimenting process, a foundation is built for Christian institutions to make use of the best offerings of integrative thinking.

Martin’s goal is for integrative thinkers to discover a new way forward by holding two opposing models in tension instead of choosing one at the expense of the other. With his process, integrative thinkers generate creative resolutions to the tension to form a new idea containing elements of the opposing ideas that is superior to each. With a decision to proceed with either model in tension, there are certainly trade-offs and losses, but if one is patient and diligent, Martin insists a new way forward will emerge.

Christian institutions have a long history of holding together what others would push apart. The following opposing models are found throughout Scripture and have been held in tension for generations while others often want them separated: heaven and earth, life and death, and Jews and Gentiles. For a more contemporary example, consider the
following case study. Many Christian institutions find themselves in the midst of changing neighborhoods. Recalling the deep trend of the lure of cities, this can mean significant shifts working both in favor and against an individual institution’s missional reach.

Smithfield Church has enjoyed four generations of family, community and worship in their significantly rural rolling hills thirty miles outside a large Southern city. In the last generation, however, several pharmaceutical plants have come to the area bringing with them commerce, traffic and a major demographic shift. Visitors begin coming to church who look, live and worship much differently than the long time members. Some begin to volunteer and inquire about church membership. A few have mentioned some suggestions of ways to invite other newcomers in the area to worship.

A dialogue quickly ensues about potential adaptations. Should Smithfield change the way it has been doing things to accommodate this large and quickly growing population of those who have been in the area for a few months? Or should the church maintain their customs and practices with the expectations the newcomers should adapt to the way they have always done church? The discussions become divisive and extreme. Members favor one side and oppose the other: we adapt to them or they adapt to us.

According to Martin’s theory, integrative thinking can provide a way to hold opposing models in tension without sacrificing the best of either model and discern a new way that is superior to either opposing model. So how does he propose this?

Integrative thinkers approach problems in four specific ways or steps:

1. they consider more features of the problem as salient/relevant to its resolution;
2. they consider multi-directional and non-linear causality;
3. they are able to keep the ‘big picture’ in mind while they work on the individual parts of the problem;  

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13 This case study will develop throughout this chapter to offer a practical application of Martin’s process. The purpose of the case study is to provide a general example of an issue common within the Christian institutional ecology. It is by no means is intended to be comprehensive in any of Martin’s steps.

Case study dialogue is italicized.

14 Step Three will sound familiar as it is similar to how one must view a wicked problem when addressing specific smaller aspects of the larger issue. This idea will surface again in Chapter Five when we consider
4. and they find creative resolutions to the tensions inherent in the problem’s architecture. Looking at a problem in such a deliberate and conscious way creates the conditions for creativity and imagination to flourish. Each point leads itself to questions and considerations that are helpful to any institution and ones that are (presumably) inherent within decision making in Christian institutions.

Martin crafts Step One in terms of salience- what is important and relevant to both opposing models within the problem. While it may seem counterproductive or laborious, listing as many extreme differences in the two opposing models is helpful in this step. These lists make the opposing features clear and provides a perspective on what the key issues of each model are to the different stakeholders. It also widens the scope of salient features to be considered rather than condensing and confining what may be critical ideas that contribute to innovation. Some of the salient features of Smithfield’s conversation about worship styles could be

- What does it mean to adapt to a changing community? Do we change everything? Will there be anything left that is recognizable for those of us who have been here from the beginning?
- What do the new folks want from the church? What are their needs and expectations?
- Do we have the capacity to embrace new people? The space? The spirit of welcome? The supplies (e.g., do we have enough coffee or do we need other drinks)? Do we have enough teachers, nursery space, parking?
- Are there any judicatory guidelines or suggestions for changing contexts?
- What other church options are there in the area?

how the reign of God (the end) informs both our beginning, our present and all of the time leading up to the return of Christ.

• *Is this a long term change or a short term change? Will they leave and create their own church when they have the means?*

• *Is the influx of new people a permanent transition or will they move on after a few years?*

Contrary to the way most contemporary leaders have been formed, specialization is not helpful in this thought process. Specialization narrows thoughts to a specific and small area of focus and roots itself in conventional linear thinking. With integrative thinking, more salient features increase the complexity of one’s view of a problem from linear to web-like. The more salient features an institution can define for a problem, the more representation they have from the diversity of their community. The more voices heard and considered, the bigger the problem might seem, but as will become evident in the proceeding steps, the more possibilities lie in wait.

Step Two is rooted in causality, or how one makes sense of what they see in the complexity of the salient features of the problem. Causality becomes a question of relationships- Which important features of a problem are connected to others? Which players are related, literally or figuratively, to one another? Family systems theory can provide some insight when looking at the greatest points of both similarity and tension between the models, especially when examining multi-directional rather than linear relationships.

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16 It is interesting to observe the almost visceral reaction Martin has to conventional thinking. He unnecessarily demonizes it saying that conventional thinkers settle for second best, half-measures and mediocrity. This is of course to make his case for integrative thinking that much stronger, portraying it as ushering in “limitless possibilities.” It is almost amusing how his complaints about conventional linear thinking provokes one to consider him in the category of those who protest too much.
At Smithfield Church, one would ask, among other questions, how the opposing sides are related, different, similar, dependent upon each other, and independent of each other. These relationships are often indicators of their greatest points of tension and innovation.

One would also note that adaptation is the key factor in both opposing models. Might this indicate a level of anxiety around change in the congregation? The opposing models are clearly “us versus them” oriented. How might one look for a sense of “we” and are there stories in the church’s history where the congregation has faced changes? Is this behavior in the church’s DNA? One might wonder what the relationship of the church and the pharmaceutical plants is and to the local schools where the children of the newcomers will be attending? What other relationships are inherent in looking at Smithfield Church’s opposing models?

Step Three encourages integrative thinkers to keep the entire problem in mind as they address individual parts. If one considers the New Testament, the Apostle Paul did this well as he kept the meta-work of spreading the Gospel in view as he wrote letters to churches addressing individual micro-issues. This step provides the space to determine what relationships and salient features should be addressed and in what order. It also encourages web-like or nodal thinking rather than the linear thinking which favors either/or binary solutions to complex problems within integrative thinking.

Smithfield Church might consider conversations around their mission, vision and strategic plan if they have not previously. Other documents which can prove helpful are forecasts of community demographics, as well as how state and local government and social services are looking at the current and future changes in the community demographics and what the coming needs will be.

Step Four guides integrative thinkers toward possible solutions to the tension inherent in the architecture of the wicked problem. Thinkers ask questions such as “How will we know when we are done?” in this step. Even though integrative thinking is an iterative practice, for it to be successful, the process must pause at points so generative solutions can be determined and progress can be made in addressing the wicked problem.
Just as there is a “no stopping rule,” it is easy to assume there is a “no starting rule” because of the ambiguity of wicked problems. However, the work must start somewhere because as aforementioned, the worst option to take with a wicked problem is to do nothing at all.

Martin offers a simple yet profoundly revealing exercise that when combined with the above steps provides a way for leaders to guide institutions away from oppositional and often divisive dialogue and toward conversations around hope, virtues and values inherent in the community. Based on the traditional practice of a “Pro-Con” chart that lists positives and negatives about an idea, Martin finds a “Pro-Pro” chart to be more helpful in integrative thinking.

A Pro-Pro chart considers the virtues rather than the vices of ideas that seem to be in opposition. It helps stakeholders look at what they want to retain from each model to be included in a solution and it provides space to see what is missing from either or both the ideas. A typical list of pros and cons tends to paralyze people because the instinctive “fight or flight” nature of survival causes one to instantly and protectively point out the negatives of an opposing idea. The present American education system prepares students to critique, sometimes viciously, unappealing alternatives. This negativity kills creativity and shuts down efforts to find multiple possibilities. Focusing only on the positives of either model invites stakeholders to consider the best of both ideas. And consequently, it often will be the case that the drawbacks of one idea are the positives of the other.

*The Pro-Pro chart for Smithfield Church might look like this:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>They adapt to us</th>
<th>We adapt to them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

66
We maintain our traditional identity | We become a more diverse church
We have more control over our stability | It would transform our congregation
They will appreciate our historically and faith-grounded perspectives | We can share our faith and history with those unlike us
They will appreciate our authentic presentation of who we are | They will challenge us to know ourselves better
We would preserve the identity of the church so the community would not be confused | It would increase our community presence
We can teach them how to adapt to American ways of life and faith | We would become more internationally minded
We would have growth on our terms | We would have growth in numbers

Once a Pro-Pro chart is explored, Martin’s suggestion grows particularly interesting for Christian institutions as he invites participants to fall in love with each opposing idea. While it may seem like a peculiar metaphor, it is especially helpful when looking at extremely oppositional ideas. One looks at a particular model and suspends whether or not they, in reality, prefer it. Leaders guide their stakeholders in creating a list of all the virtues of the chosen model so that at the end of the process, proceeding with that model sounds like the ideal way to move forward. When participants acknowledge and understand the virtues or what is best about each model they discover valuable elements to be integrated into a new way forward.

A focus on elements of a model is significant. In the end, it is often not an entire model, be it a product or a service that will emerge from the integrative thinking process.

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17 This can be a challenging task, but one with great rewards. Speaking from personal experience, I have led denominational leaders through the creation of a Pro-Pro chart with two extremely opposing models. At the end of the exercise, one of the participants who was adamantly opposed to one of the models said, “I had no idea there are that many positive things about looking at the issue that way. I thought there was no way I would like, much less, love that side of the Pro-Pro chart.” This is only possible when leaders build a foundation of trust with their participants so that they can suspend their negativity for the sake of the exercise. The reward is a new vision, empathy for others and a wider grasp on the way God is working in the tension of opposing models.
More likely it will be elements that are easily transferable from one model to another to innovate within a system. This is where integrative thinking is most effective in the face of oppositional thinking and wicked problems. Stakeholders fall into the trap of thinking an issue is “all or nothing” or “a compromise means I have to lose something.” Often, significant and transferable pieces, values and nuances emerge from Martin’s “falling in love” process, rather than an entire system. It is these values that then help change binary oppositional conversations to more fruitful integrative experiences.

It is not important to determine which virtues are best or outrank others. This exercise is to help thinkers consider rather than choose or evaluate models. Leveraging the tensions between opposing models and falling in love with something outside one’s comfort zone enables what might have been a binary discussion to develop into a conversation about institutional and personal values, something Christian institutions are more equipped to discuss.

Martin’s metaphor of falling in love with an opposing model helps thinkers move beyond initial reactions, and those most commonly associated with conventional thinking, to that with which they do not naturally connect. When someone does not feel comfortable about a model, typical reactions are to assume they are wrong or do not fully understand the virtues of the way you see things. Other reactions are to assume someone is ill-informed, uneducated or motivated by an agenda. Conventional thinkers respond to opposing, or as Martin calls them in this case, clashing models, in one of two ways.

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These may seem familiar as they are similar to reactions to wicked problems from Chapter Two. Some fear, deny or avoid the fact that opposing models exist and then either seek to invalidate and erase them or give into them, reinforcing the idea that an opposition ever existed. Strategic Christian institutional leaders see the opportunity in opposing models and use integrative thinking to leverage the tension of opposing models to reinforce virtues and values in their institutions.

*For Smithfield Church, the similarities which arise from falling in love with their two opposing models which can get them closer to an integrative solution might look like these:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>They adapt to us</th>
<th>We adapt to them</th>
<th>Shared Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We maintain our traditional identity</td>
<td>We become a more diverse church</td>
<td>Who we are matters to us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have more control over our stability</td>
<td>It would transform our congregation</td>
<td>How change happens matters to us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They will appreciate our historically and faith-grounded perspectives</td>
<td>We can share our faith and history with those unlike us</td>
<td>We want to share our faith and history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They will appreciate our authentic presentation of who we are</td>
<td>They will challenge us to know ourselves better</td>
<td>Our identity is important to us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We would preserve the identity of the church so the community would not be confused</td>
<td>It would increase our community presence</td>
<td>We care about the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can teach them how to adapt to American ways of life and faith</td>
<td>We would become more internationally minded</td>
<td>We have much to teach and learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We would have growth on our terms</td>
<td>We would have growth in numbers</td>
<td>Growth is good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From the Pro Pro exercise, the opposing sides of the discussion of the international demographic shift of the area surrounding Smithfield Church would be able to appreciate that their church as a whole values their identity, history, faith and community. They believe they have much to teach and learn and agree that growth is a good thing for their congregation. Additionally, how change happens in their congregation matters to them, so care should be taken that the*
congregation is kept informed and dialogue is kept open. Identifying and acknowledging these common values is a significant hurdle. Their discovered shared values are likely topics which are easier to discuss rather than the oppositional models they have backed themselves into about adaptations. Focusing on what they share and are committed to is not only a productive way to (re)start this conversation, but also can function as “neutral playing field” to which they can return as their conversations continue to develop. Acknowledging shared values opens space for empathy and shared understanding to flourish among those holding fast to oppositional models.

It may be surprising for a secular business text such as The Opposable Mind to encourage a virtue like empathy, however Martin is confident that being good at integrative thinking includes being good at empathy. In order truly to fall in love with an opposing idea, the thoughts and feelings of others connected to or affected by that idea must be considered. Martin acknowledges what he calls a “like me bias” where it is easier to have empathy for those who are similar, mirror one’s self and share peer groups. At the same time, considering the needs of those who are different not only exemplifies Jesus’ commandment to love God and love one’s neighbor; it also helps stakeholders better appreciate the challenges outside of their purview and then value the advantages of other models. Empathy enables thinkers to step away from assumptions and instinctive conclusions in order to think in broader and more compassionate ways. Of particular note, Jennifer Riehl, Martin’s protégé, invites integrative thinkers to pay close attention when something surprises them when considering an opposing model.19 Discovering an unexpected gem of clarity, resonance or kinship is an indicator that empathy is at work, thus one is on the path to an integrative thinking breakthrough.

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Martin’s path to integrative thinking, while it can produce helpful results, is not a quick and easy four step process. He readily admits that the more salient features that come to life, the more complicated the causal relationships will be, resulting in what he simply calls a “mess.” The reward for wading through the complexity and tension of a mess can be a more holistic vision because the entire problem is addressed rather than merely its symptoms or side effects. Martin insists that complexity and messiness in a wicked problem create the conditions for breakthrough resolutions. He also helpfully notes the difference integrative thinkers draw between chaos and complexity in a mess. Chaos is something one typically wants to avoid. “Complexity doesn’t have to be overwhelming if we can master our initial panic reaction and look for patterns, connections and causal relationships. Our capacity to handle complexity is greater than we give ourselves credit for.”  

Christian institutions have language to sustain us while wading through complexity: faith and hope.

While integrative thinking can be an effective tool when trying to generate new ideas to address wicked problems facing Christian institutions, it will only work if the tension between opposing models is acknowledged and addressed. Unfortunately, as discussed in Chapter One, many sectors of the Church have a history of turning a blind eye in the face of deep trends, conflict, change and crisis. When institutions fail to see the tension in opposing models they eliminate the possibility for integrative thinking. Acknowledging and leaning into creative resolutions of the tension of opposing models paves the way for integrative thinking and is evidence of faith that God is doing

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20 Martin, *The Opposable Mind*, 81.
something new in the midst of tension. This tension provides space for hope, patience, possibility and empathy rather than the confining aspects of oppositional thinking.

Martin describes the way in which tensions should be held in integrative thinking. “Hold two creative ideas in constructive tension.” Many Christian institutional leaders err on the side of consensus in resolving a tension. Disagreement or tension is often viewed as a negative and a failure of leadership. In some institutions it can point to disunity or even the presence of evil working against communal harmony. Strategic leaders encourage some level of disagreement and discord in decision making because it ignites passion, forcing those supporting or in opposition to a given side to clarify important issues. In the same way, constructive tension creates the conditions for passionate convictions to arise, encouraging the identification of values. Once the conversation turns from opposition to values, opposing sides often find they are more alike than different.

Value-based conversations help Christian institutions clarify commitment to their mission rather than their models. Too often organizations fall so passionately in love with their model of functioning, they lose sight of their mission. This is where integrative thinking becomes a critical practice of survival and renewal for struggling institutions. It is also a practice for healthy institutions to iterate to maintain health and focus. Institutions that take calculated risks and innovate within their mission have a greater chance of a future of human flourishing than those who are stuck staring doe-eyed at their once innovative and formerly interesting models. The mission of Christian institutions will never change; the focus will always be embodying the example of Christ and bearing witness to the reign of God. The model of Christian institutions is and will remain subject
to the deep trends of its context and it deserves the most creative integrative thinking and Holy Spirit-inspired innovation to meet its mission.

Martin’s work provides accessible ways for Christian institutional leaders to help their stakeholders reframe their conversations about wicked problems from oppositional (hopeless, limited and finite) to integrative thinking. This changes their conversations from sides or ultimatums to values. Most wicked problems are not about the topic or name defining them, and instead are about deeply held convictions and a desire to protect that which is sacred and deeply personal. Integrative thinking and, as will be discussed in the following chapter, improvisation can take conversations out of humanity’s finite thinking and open them up to God’s infinite possibilities.

While working toward the infinite possibilities bearing witness to the reign of God, Christian institutions are still, nonetheless, working with human constructs. As such, some critiques of Martin’s work should be mentioned. While Martin may not like to admit it, there are things (and people) that will not integrate. Sometimes an institution simply refuses to change and ignores the deep trends at their doorstep. Also, he claims integrative thinkers always seek creative resolution of a problem and will not settle for resignation or simply “good enough.” Time, money and energy often place constraints on an institution; there are occasions when “done is better than perfect.”

Another critique of Martin’s work is rooted in his first step of the integrative thinking process. Martin asserts that considering as many salient features as possible will increase one’s probability for truly innovative solutions. Specialization and
simplification, in his eyes, are the opposite of integrative thinking. Malcolm Gladwell in his best seller, *Blink*, offers a warning to this idea.

We live in a world saturated with information. We have virtually unlimited amounts of data at our fingertips at all times, and we’re well versed in the arguments about the dangers of not knowing enough and not doing our homework. But what I have sensed is an enormous frustration with the unexpected costs of knowing too much, of being inundated with information. We have come to confuse information with understanding.  

As an example, Gladwell offers the story of a hospital’s approach to treating cardiac patients. A study found that doctors needed only a few markers to determine if a patient needs additional testing, is in imminent danger of a heart attack, or should be admitted for observation. This was shocking news to a generation of doctors who believe the more data they have about a patient, the better equipped they are to make informed decisions. The study showed that ordering numerous tests, which have a possibility of providing small amounts of information, is actually counterproductive. The wealth of information overwhelms the physician and prevents them from focusing on the most significant and clear indicators of cardiac health or distress. More is not always better and in this story, it was often deadly.

Gladwell’s work goes a step further in defining the proper use of qualities and quantities of information. He believes that for the most important decisions, like most in an emergency room, leaders perform better when they rely on their instincts and training rather than spending time collecting additional information. It is in smaller decisions, for example, whether one should choose a green or a yellow cast for a broken arm, decision

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makers feel they make better choices and are happier with their outcomes after taking
time and weighing their options.

Imagine the implications for a Christian institution. Similar to the field of
medicine, more information is preferred over less, often without regard for the quality of
the information. Surveys, interviews and consultations abound in the ecology of Christian
institutions as each one is grappling with its own wicked problems. “If we just knew
more about what they were wanting/thinking/doing, we could….” While Martin insists
that the quantity of information is preferable, particularly when it comes to collecting
salient perspectives, Gladwell agrees with him only in minor issues. Knowing the
difference then, is key. But how often is there clarity or consensus on what issues are
major and which are minor in Christian institutions?22

Gladwell’s claim that important decisions should be made based on training and
instinct also applies when time is of the essence. Citing another example, this one in a
war simulation, he writes, “Being able to act intelligently and instinctively in the moment
is possible only after a long and rigorous course of education and experience.”23 This is at
the heart of training for first responders who make life or death decisions every day. It is
in the best interest of everyone that they be trained thoroughly. The same is true for a
different kind of responder addressed in the next chapter. Those who train and practice
the arts of improvisation make what appear to be spontaneous decisions to carry

22 Perhaps there is a correlation in how an institution distinguishes between major and minor issues and
how they commit to a mission rather than a model.

23 Ibid., 259.
conversations forward in comedy. While life and death may not be on the line for improvisers of comedy, issues of eternity are within the prevue of improvisational leaders within the Church.

And finally, in light of all the stories Martin records of astounding work of the integrative thinkers he interviewed from the business sector, one must question if integrative thinking is as effective and productive as Martin claims, why is it not better known? Why is everyone not doing it? The answer is condemning. Integrative thinking requires many of the “soft skills” which are in short supply in the workforce today: empathizing, collaborating, creating, leading and building relationships.24 These skills are not only crucial to integrative thinking and addressing today’s wicked problems; they are also skills that are critical for emerging leaders.25 Effective leaders today are critical thinkers, exceptional communicators, crafters of generative solutions and relationship savvy. These are not necessarily the desired skills of previous generations of leaders. Ironically the human attributes needed to be a good integrative thinker are, frankly, deeply human. Technology has enabled so many jobs and tasks to become automated, leaving behind a need for one of the primary tasks computers cannot offer: human skills.

While it might seem innate, the need for humans to be good at being human is not necessarily a given. Human fragility, short-comings, failures and fallen nature are bound up with all of the wonders of our humanity. Being good is hard work, as is empathy, open-mindedness, flexibility and keeping commitments, all of which are key to being a


25 They are also lacking in humanity in general as discussed in Chapter Two.
good human, and being an effective integrative thinker. Considering models, walking in another’s shoes and having the patience to wade through complexity with faith that a better way lies ahead is the path least taken explicitly because it requires so much work. Martin assures his readers his integrative thinking skills can be learned and mastered with time and effort. Might time and effort ensure the mastery of the much needed human skills? Perhaps this is the next wicked problem for not just Christian institutions but for all institutions.

As with wicked problems, there are multiple habits and practices\textsuperscript{26} to reframe problems that can result in positive, imaginative and proactive ways to move forward. The integrative thinking process works well in tandem with other problem solving methods. Knowing there is no perfect method, Martin writes, “if nothing else, integrative thinking improves the odds of success, without foreclosing other actions and disciplines that other (business) thinkers rely on to solve problems.”\textsuperscript{27} Merely improving the odds of success is not the ideal, but given the truly wicked dimensions of many of the problems facing Christian institutions today, it is a great place to start.

As we have come to learn with integrative thinking, considering many salient factors, as well as their causal relationships and architecture can open, in Martin’s words, seemingly “limitless possibilities” as opposed to oppositional choices. Falling in love with opposing models, while a challenge, can also invite shareholders into meaningful

\textsuperscript{26} For example, consider feed-forward thinking as opposed to working from feedback. Looking at a wicked problem through feed-forward thinking enables stakeholders to view the problem from a desired future state rather than uncertain possible states.

\textsuperscript{27} Martin, \textit{The Opposable Mind}, 16.
value-based conversations with which Christian institutions are poised to contribute. Leaders when who help their stakeholders and institutions effectively hold ideas in tension with each other will not only have healthier and more capable decision makers in their institutions, they will also have ones who model what it means to live in the New Testament idea of “the already and the not yet” within the reign of God. And leaders who help their stakeholders embody their true humanity by practicing empathy when considering the values, biases and convictions of others enable their people to more deeply live into their identity as those made in the image of God. Being firmly rooted in one’s identity and tradition becomes a critical element to the success of another interdisciplinary practice to be discussed in the next chapter. Like integrative thinking, the comedic art of improvisation holds within its practices a framework of habits that can help discern integrative pathways forward in the work of wicked problems.
Chapter Four: Improvisation

Creative and effective Christian leaders practice traditioned innovation through interdisciplinary techniques such as improvisation. Most often associated with the theater, improvisation is “a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear.”¹ In his book *Improvisation*, Sam Wells illuminates how Christian institutions can embody the trust embedded in improvisation to face an uncertain future. This aligns with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s thoughts on holding opposing ideas in tension and continuing to function. Improvisation can hold in tension wicked problems and other issues facing institutions, with a foundation of habits and practices grounded in a tradition of formation and training. Wells pushes improvisation in the Christian context a step further by rooting it in Christian convictions. Reliance on habits and practices steeped in tradition is critical to the success of improvisation, traditioned innovation and integrative thinking.

While improvisation has a long history with drama, music and choreography, it has been much slower breaking into the American culture scene. Viewers saw a glimpse of it through the early 1980’s television comedy *Mork and Mindy* starring a then unknown Robin Williams.² Williams became notorious for acting outside of the shows’ scripts so often, writers blocked specific times in each episode for him to improvise his


² When Williams arrived to audition for the role of Mork the Martian he was invited to sit in a chair in front of the interviewing team. A true improver, Williams approached the chair and sat on his head. He was hired on the spot. *Wikipedia: Mork & Mindy*. 12 February 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mork_%26_Mindy. 19 February 2016.
way through a scene.³ In 1999, an American version of a British improvisation comedy show called *Whose Line is it Anyway?* hit television screens. Famous comedians such as *Whose Line* host Drew Carey and improv actors Ryan Stiles, Wayne Brady and Colin Mochrie brought the art and practice of improvisation out of the confines of dance studios, music halls and comedy clubs and to the attention of the broader American public. The famous names brought assumptions about the practice of improvisation. Many of the actors on the show already had successful comedy careers; they had been making people laugh for years in various kinds of venues. It can easily be assumed comedy and thus improvisation are their gifts, their talents, their crafts—something innate within them, like those who are born funny.

The theatrical use of improvisation is undoubtedly funny and seemingly effortless. In reality, improvisation is a craft, honed over years of training to establish a foundation of practices from which to draw improvised actions. In fact, Wells describes that their training is so thorough, improvisers “learn to act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstance.”⁴ The comedic experts at The Second City⁵ root improvisation in

³ Interestingly, the show’s first season was a hit. Trying to capitalize on the rave reviews, producers made several alterations to the show to increase its popularity. They dropped major characters and changed the storyline from a Martian trying to acclimate to Earth to a romantic relationship between a Martian and a human. The result is predictable. The producers changed too much. Season 2 of *Mork and Mindy* saw a sharp decrease in ratings and failed to recover in subsequent seasons. Producers were unable to keep enough of the tradition or foundation of the show and leaned too heavily toward innovation and trying to capture more viewers. In the end, they could not regain the delicate balance of the show’s original chemistry. Ibid.


⁵ The Second City is an improvisational comedy enterprise which began as a small cabaret group of undergraduates and now is widely known as the training ground for some of the most successful comedians in the United States. The enterprise now consists of traveling improv groups, theaters, television programs and training centers. The training centers host leaders and institutions from around the world who want to learn how improvisation can affect change in their contexts.
creativity, communication and collaboration, all of which need instruction and practice to master.\textsuperscript{6} Much like a doctor is trained to respond to a medical crisis with a specific remedy or procedure, comedic improvisers respond out of their training and theatrical education, as well as their trust in their comedy ensemble. “Improvisation is not about outstandingly gifted individuals who can conjure up rapid fire gags from a standing start. It is about nurturing a group of people to have such trust in one another that they have a high level of common understanding and they take the same things for granted.”\textsuperscript{7}

Strong Christian leaders create and nurture environments for innovative habits and practices grounded in tradition to become instinctive within their constituencies. A foundation of the best of an institution’s tradition is critical to a healthy future, especially with the social complexity embedded in the deep trends and the uncertainty of wicked problems facing Christian institutions. In the last chapter we explored how integrative thinking offers specific practices to help institutions avoid the frustrating habit of backing themselves into oppositional choices. Roger Martin insists creative and innovative ways forward are waiting to be discovered. Improvisation integrates interdisciplinary habits and practices such as experimentation, creating safe places for risk and failure, the preference of ensembles over teams and the use of humor to shift conversations and mindsets. The art of improvisation is essentially the embodiment of traditioned innovation as improvisers build their craft on a tradition of training, scholarship and experience. This foundation of tradition enables them to innovate, integrate and


\textsuperscript{7} Wells, Improvisation, 68.
improvise their way through challenging contexts knowing the end is already determined in the reign of God.

Spontaneity often can be associated with improvisation because of the seemingly “on the fly” tasks or topics given to improvisers to perform. For those who prefer control and predictability, this can be uncomfortable. However when habits and mindsets are formed from tradition and faithful habits and practice, spontaneity, often associated with fear and uncertainty, no longer has to be intimidating. Leaders or institutions may appear as if they are acting spontaneously or without regard to context or circumstances. Actually, the cultivation of tradition-based habits and practices enables spontaneity to be an invitation for leaders to act out of a foundation of sound and respected instincts and assumptions. This is especially helpful given the uncertainty and complexity associated with wicked problems and other issues facing Christian institutions. Often crises arise and institutions question their mission and model. An environment sustained in habits and practices of its tradition provides a path for the institution to return to its roots, remember its mission and vision, and reframe their model and work in the community.

Improvisation’s reliance on a tradition or foundation of habits and practices to pave new ways of perceiving and being in a given situation enables it to be a practical and useful tool for fields other than comedy, most specifically for Christian institutional leadership. In this context, the Bible functions not exclusively as a script for those engaging in the art of improvisation, but, as Wells writes,

the church learns and performs as it (the Bible) is a training school that shapes the habits and practices of the community. This community learns to take the right things for granted, and on the basis of this faithfulness, it trusts itself to improvise
within its tradition. Improvisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its tradition in new and often challenging circumstances; and this is exactly what the church is called to do.8

In this way, Scripture functions as both script and witness to the stories and practices of the church to provide Christians “with the uninhibited freedom sometimes experienced by theatrical improvisers.”9 Faithful improvisation then, can be found in the way the Holy Spirit continues to nurture and encourage Christian communities in light of its Scriptural tradition. Accordingly, Wells writes, “improvisation is the only term that adequately describes the desire to cherish a tradition without being locked in the past.”10

Strong Christian leaders seeking to guide their institutions in practices of traditioned innovation will find new and creative paths to faithfulness to God through the art of improvisation.

The beauty of improvising within the Christian tradition is, as will be discussed more in the next chapter, the end is already determined. The phrase “the end is our beginning”11 helps Christians keep their focus on what is important: God and the reign of God. The church looks to the reign of God as the beginning of its narrative, so in the present, the church’s primary task is to join the Holy Spirit in conforming the community to Christ. The church is not expected to know what will happen as the future unfolds, but prepare for what will happen, regardless of what it might be. The only way to faithfully


9 Wells, Improvisation, 11.

10 Ibid., 66.

move forward in such circumstances is through improvisation. The church knows its history and it knows its ultimate future. Until God unfolds what is to come, being faithful is all improvisation.

The development of habits and practices to sustain Christians and Christian institutions in uncertainty rests in the core of faithful discipleship. Wells says it best when he writes, “As it is often said, those who are called geniuses attribute their status to 99 percent perspiration, 1 percent inspiration. Most of the Christian life is faithful preparation for an unknown test. …What is spontaneity but the result of years of experience?” Spontaneity comes with less stress when one has a lifetime of experiential habits and practices from which to draw. To many, spontaneity appears to be a choice made in the moment, therefore the focus becomes making good choices. With engrained habits and practices steeped in a tradition of faith and Scripture, crises, surprises and conflicts no longer have to be about choices but about instincts rooted in discipleship. In fact, those committed to faithful discipleship formation can come to see conflicts as opportunities to experiment and innovate within one’s tradition.

Experimentation is the primary act of trust within improvisation. What may appear as experimentation happening among actors on a stage is truly anything but random. Experimentation in improvisation is a commitment to draw upon an ensemble’s foundation of experience and practice and trust in each other to see their scene through.

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Experimentation is also a key component of faith. How often does an organization ask itself, *What will we do when this all falls apart?* and *What if this fails and everyone sees it?* Hesitance and resistance arise out of fears of failure. Nurturing a culture of experimentation makes failure survivable over time.\(^\text{13}\) It also creates a grace-filled environment for following the Holy Spirit, trusting one’s gut or listening to a hunch. Celebrations and scaling successes follow as does learning and teaching others from failures. How might a Christian institution’s outlook regarding risk and experimentation differ if instead of asking questions which plan for their failure, ask questions such as, *What will we do if this succeeds?* Christian institutions ought to be paving the way as experimentation laboratories as part of their calling to innovation.

Experimentation allows for other questions to be asked within Christian institutions. When confronting sin and evil in Christian community, questions such as *What is the worst thing that can happen?* ought to be raised. Considering this question, while it can feel scary and uncertain, actually leads to empowerment and freedom to move forward with boldness. After the worst possible thing is determined, the follow-up question is *What would happen then?* This question affirms there is life and hope after answering the first question. It eases the paralysis that can come with thoughts of the worst possible scenario.\(^\text{14}\) *What would happen then?* helps institutions think beyond themselves to the collective work of their ecology and the bigger picture of God’s work in the world.

\(^\text{13}\) Provided, of course the experiments are of appropriate scale.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 109.
When Christian institutions recognize their work is about the reign of God they can confidently proceed knowing their mission drives their strategy which then drives their structure. Building a platform of experimentation into the structure of an institution’s work is critical. When there is space for experimentation, ideas can be fleshed out and tried without putting the entire organization at stake. On the other hand, if an institution’s focus is elsewhere than the reign of God, excessive caution can take over and induce paralysis. This is why a platform, a safe space, and environment conducive to experimentation models the hope of the Gospel. The popular internet meme by Erin Hanson comes to mind, “What if I fall? Oh but my darling, what if you fly?” In fear and faith, experimentation gives the church wings to (safely) fledge, fall and fly.

Perhaps it goes back to a conservative Christian culture or even a Puritanesque predisposition against all things enjoyable, but experimentation can make some Christians nervous. Put the word “experiment” in the same sentence as “teenagers” and parents cringe. Experimentation is not always risky, scary and prone to bad things happening.

Malcom Gladwell, in his best seller The Tipping Point, attempts to reclaim the connotation and act of experimentation in a unique way—in the context of drugs and teenagers. While it is an extreme example, his findings are worth quoting in full.

The absolutist approach to fighting drugs proceeds on the premise that experimentation equals addiction. We don’t want our children ever to be exposed to heroin or pot or cocaine because we think the lure of these substances is so strong that even the smallest exposure will be all it takes. But do you know what the experimentation statistics are for illegal drugs? In the 1996 Household Survey on Drug Abuse, 1.1 percent of those polled said they had used heroin at least
once. But only 18% of that 1.1 percent had used it in the past year, and only 9% had used it in the past month. That is not the profile of a particularly sticky drug.

The figures for cocaine are even more striking. Of those who have ever tried cocaine, less than one percent- 0.9% are regular users. What these figures tell us is that experimentation and hard core users are two entirely separate things. … In fact, the sheer number of people who appear to have tried cocaine at least once should tell us that the urge among teens to try something dangerous is pretty nearly universal. This is what teens do. This is how they learn about the world, and most of the time- in 99.1% of the cases with cocaine- that experimentation doesn’t result in anything bad happening. We have to stop fighting this kind of experimentation. We have to accept it and even embrace it. … What we should be doing instead of fighting experimentation is making sure that experimentation doesn’t have serious consequences.15

After one recovers from the shock and strangeness of this analogy, read that last sentence again. “What we should be doing instead of fighting experimentation is making sure that experimentation doesn't have serious consequences.”16 Gladwell’s exhortation is not confined to teenagers and drugs. His words are universal and particularly poignant for Christian institutions. Experimentation is a natural process of learning among humans and institutions. It is how children learn ice is cold and a lit candle is hot; they learn from experimenting with what they touch. Opportunities lie in how we choose to teach, model and speak about strategic and survivable ways to experiment.

Christian institutions have an opportunity to widen their invitations of grace to their communities by rethinking their practices of experimentation. This is certainly not to suggest providing a consequence-free place for teenagers to experiment with drugs. It is to suggest on a much larger scale that Christian institutions are positioned to provide


16 Ibid.
consequence-free places for numerous variations of stepping out in faith with Holy Spirit-led experiments so crazy only God could be behind them. Institutions that nurture faithful experimentation where people have the freedom to experiment and fail learn the grace that comes with mistakes.

There is an element of risk, a jolt of energy associated with experimentation, clearly present when teenagers are enticed to experiment with drugs, and it should be even more present when the church steps out in faith to follow God’s unique call conforming their community to Christ. “The Messiah has come, has been put to death, has been raised; and the spirit has come. This is a great liberation for the church. It leaves Christians free, in faith, to make honest mistakes.”¹⁷ Indeed. Honest mistakes come when leaders risk experiments with their people. And honest mistakes only come from those who make the effort and try something new. How many institutions only do what they know they are good at and thus never dream dreams or follow their imagination to innovative places unknown? In this way, fear of failure is paralyzing.

Failure is seen so differently in improvisation. Rather than focusing on the consequences of a failure, improvisers do not let the conversation end because of a failed line. They use the failure as an opportunity to shift courses, return to the original idea or build on the humor of the failure until a new pathway emerges. Christian institutions have much to learn from the way improvisation embraces failure.

Too often failure is a “bad” word in Christian institutions. And yet all humans fail at times. Failure happens for multiple and distinguishable reasons. Most people would

¹⁷ Wells, *Improvisation*, 57.
agree that life, even a life modeled after Jesus Christ, cannot be failure-free because of the sinful nature of our humanity. And yet, why do so many feel they need to be right all of the time, especially given that Christianity is deeply rooted in practices of forgiveness?

Some authority figures proclaim that failure is not an option. And this is supposed to be encouraging and uplifting? In reality, the opposite is true. Failure is inevitable, because humans are fallible. Making “failure is not an option” even more of an inappropriate and ridiculous battle cry, the phrase insights fear, which is the greatest threat to creativity and innovation. Organizations, therefore, which shrink the negative connotations of failure blaze vital paths for innovation and creativity.

The authors of Yes, And claim that if an organization is good at what they do, they will certainly fail at times because they are risking new ideas and experimenting with innovative techniques. Similarly, institutions reap generous increases in productivity, morale and creativity when they expect failure as part of their innovative process. This affirms the worthwhile investment of a safe environment where failure can happen.18 Christian institutions are in a prime position to offer a platform where thoughtful experimentation, failure and mistakes are not only encouraged, but rewarded. Without such a platform innovation will not flourish, and for that matter, neither will the human spirit. For Christian institutions to feel free to innovate into the future, they must nurture ways to destigmatize failure.19 This is in the “wheelhouse” of Christian community

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18 Leonard and Yorton Yes, And. 142.

19 Ibid., 211.
given our role of “creators” because God creates and created first and our call to forgive because God forgives and forgave us first.

Wells affirms this kind of freedom for the Church and Christian institutions when he invites them to “play” in the creative and life-giving paths God is leading them. He reflects on the words of an experienced director saying,

“Mistakes are reevaluated as possibilities of new directions… Brightness is more a question of attitude, not of what you do but of how you do it, whether you are prepared to play with what comes along.” And the keyword here is play. Play describes what happens when the actors are relieved of the responsibility of making the drama come out right. They no longer have a limited set of possible outcomes at which they must force the story to arrive. They can therefore begin to enjoy the story and not determine the drama.  

“Enjoy the story and not determine the drama” is another way of saying, “the end is our beginning.” It is an invitation to “play” among the vast abundance of God’s creation as we seek to conform our communities to Christ. The “and” in Wells’ invitation to “enjoy the story and not determine the drama” also embodies another key practice of improvisation for Christian institutions: the power of “and.”

When one learns from their failure, their narrative does not end in loss. If there is redemption, if there is a moral or a lesson, the admission of a mistake continues with an “and.” This small word is critical to learning from failures, conducting experiments, improvising and integrative thinking. It is also implied in the phrase “traditioned innovation” as one holds in tension innovation and tradition. The small conjunction “and” provides leaders with a powerful affirmation and connective tool. “And” allows a failure to be viewed as a path to a gain rather than a loss because it continues the story.

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Specifically within the world of theatrical improvisation, “and” is a powerful and anticipatory tool. It offers the ultimate second chance. “And” means whatever has been said or done by one actor is accepted and the story will continue with that which the receiving actor says or does. This little conjunction conveys acceptance of what is, even in an ambiguous form, and at the same time offers hope for what is to come.

Even more powerful within improvisation is the addition of “Yes” forming “Yes, And” as a way to respond to ideas, people and challenges. The Second City believes “Yes, And” is the bedrock of all improvisation. At its core is the belief that while not every idea in life must be acted upon, ideas simply need to be given a chance. Saying “Yes, And” to an idea and stretching and building upon it, often to the point of absurdity, creates an environment for innovation to spring forth. People get nervous when “Yes, And” is used in conversation because it can lead to unexpected or uncharted places. However it is only with this kind of willingness to “play” and lean into the “Yes, And” process that institutions can follow ideas to see what lies beneath and possibly hit innovative gold.21

“Yes” or “No” without an “and” allow only one side of a binary conversation to have control. When improvisers, or anyone else for that matter, immediately respond to an idea in the negative, creativity is crushed. This is why Martin advocates for a “Pro Pro” chart as opposed to bringing negatives (Cons) into integrative thinking. When negativity enters the picture, innovation exits. The same is true for improvisation within Christian institutions. “And” means no matter how dire things might look in the world,

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21 This idea can also link back to Chapter Three and Martin’s idea of “falling in love” with ideas uncommon to one’s comfort zone. The Pro Pro chart experience can be an opportunity to “play” with ideas one normally does not let one’s self consider.
good will triumph. Christ has died. And Christ has risen. And Christ will rise again. Christ’s “Yes, And” keeps the story going. Christ lived and died with an “and” at heart, and the church is given the perfect example to follow.

Christian institutions can also look to Scripture for examples of improvisation and putting “and” to work for the spread of the Gospel. In the earliest traditions of church, the Acts of the Apostles record the consistent tensions of Jewish and Gentile contexts. The Council of Jerusalem is a narrative of the disciples trying to faithfully improvise as God’s good news moved beyond the safety of its Jewish origins. The text records several oppositions in need of both integrative thinking and improvisation: Jews and Gentiles, and circumcised and uncircumcised, to name a few. If the Council settled on either side of the oppositions, the Gospel message would be hindered. The Council improvised and bypassed an oppositional choice, and proceeded with the integrated choice. In true Gospel fashion, they made room for all of God’s children in the early church.

Consider, also, Jesus’ three years with his disciples. How many sermons preached about the disciples have stories and insinuations of the disciples’ failures? The Gospels provide example after example of Jesus creating a safe place for them to learn and sometimes fail, so that when he is gone, they will be able to effectively improvise without him. Through miracles, sermons and private time together, Jesus forms the disciples in Godly practices, trusting them to build a solid tradition of habits upon which they can improvise in challenging circumstances without him. Just as Jesus trained the disciples, so too, his example is for all of God’s children. We are called to improvise.
The Gospels record stories of Jesus improvising in multiple contexts. Not surprisingly, Jesus improvises in a unique way. In theatrical improvisation vocabulary, Jesus “over-accepts” as he improvises. Over-accepting, according to Wells, is the practice “in which a community fits a new action or concept into a larger narrative, into the greater drama of what God is doing in the world.”22 When presented with an oppositional choice, Jesus chooses not to get caught in a conflict of binary options and instead proceeds in an integrative manner over-accepting and improving upon all apparent options.

Matthew 22 records the story of the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus in a question of loyalty to Rome or God. The Pharisees ask Jesus if it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Jesus knows either a yes or no answer will elicit more questions which the Pharisees will use to back him into a political corner. Instead of responding with one of the obvious binary answers, he responds with a question (a classic improvisational response which keeps the story moving). The Pharisees respond to his question noting it is Caesar’s head on the coin. Jesus then over-accepts in his response to the Pharisees’ original question. Instead of answering a query about taxes, he expands the question so that it is not limited to Caesar. Jesus’ clever response, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21) draws the conversation to a higher spiritual realm. His answer is also a clear example of an integrative thinking response. He chooses neither model presented and creates one which is superior to a yes or a no. Jesus over-accepts and sets an example for Christian

institutional leaders. He widens the scope of what appears to be a confining question and strengthens his response by turning the attention toward God.

Improvisation’s use of ensembles is another valuable practical takeaway that offers Christian institutions a model for keeping the attention on God while effectively using their strengths. While many institutions default to using teams, just the word “teams” connote competition and working for and against something or someone. An ensemble is different. “It is a thing into itself, an entity that is only its true self when its members are performing as one.”23 Ensembles carry the advantage of an interconnected group of creative resources, and their members, with time, can both predict others’ actions and welcome new creativity. Because those in an ensemble are equally invested in the outcome of their work, the work flourishes. Ensembles work to be flexible in responding to each other; and, their flexibility extends to embracing the work of new ensemble members. This is significant because an organization’s talented human resources will always be sought after and lured away by other institutions. Leading and working according to the principles of ensembles can increase retention and slow down the talent drain from an institution.

Leonard and Yorton pose an interesting leadership question when investing in young talent within an organization: “Talent will always be drawn to bigger and better opportunities, so shouldn't you be providing them ample chance to become part of something bigger than themselves?”24 Some institutions may view this idea as a form of

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23 Leonard and Yorton, Yes, And, 51.

24 Ibid., 56.
treason, carefully watching their turn-over numbers as if they are something to be feared.

Strong Christian institutions are called to nurture and bless their talent in the same manner The Second City has for generations of improvisers. The City knows their young comics will stay with them while they hone their talent and inevitably, they will eventually leave. However, because of the ensemble approach, they have created a system that is “continually able to refresh its creative force.” Each generation of performers teaches others what they know. When one actor leaves an ensemble, taking with them their unique gifts and talents, a new one is welcomed without an expectation of fulfilling the role of their predecessor. The entrance of new talent provides an opportunity for the ensemble to shift and change according to the integration of their collective strengths and weaknesses. Ensembles at The Second City practice this kind of constant shifting in leadership and talent through a dynamic exercise called “Follow the Follower.” Inherent in the exercise is a principle that gives the group the flexibility to allow any member to assume leadership for as long as his or her expertise is needed, and then to shuffle the hierarchy again once the group’s needs change... allowing each member of the ensemble – our knowledge workers, who each bring a particular expertise to the group – to take the reins when necessary.

This style of leadership and working with others adapts well within in Christian institutions and comfortably finds its place within the wider working world.

While improvisation has valuable lessons and techniques applicable to Christian institutional leadership, the craft also leaves room for possible critiques. One critique of

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 17.
using improvisation in the context of Christian institutions could be its lack of reverence for, well, anything. Within comedy, almost anything is fair game for jokes, banter and roasting. Certainly topics as reverent and serious as the church and God make some anxious when they are subjects in the comedic realm. Improvisation helps institutions create safe spaces for tense conversations.

The Second City has a sector solely devoted to helping institutions innovate and change through comedy and improvisation. Leonard and Yorton write,

> When the status quo is no longer working, organizations and leaders need a way to change the conversation and get people to reconsider the assumptions that are leading them astray. There are different ways to do this, but we help our clients do it with thoughtfully crafted comedic messages that grab peoples’ attention and get them to face the uncomfortable reality of the situation, without being threatening or disparaging. Comedy makes it possible to talk gently but forcefully about what's broken, while clearly making the case for change…. To be truly effective, we have to help our clients build the capacity to solve problems. So when people are afraid to push into new territory or to adopt major change, we bring in our secret weapon – improvisation – to help them build the key skills that improve individual and organizational agility, thus enabling and supporting whatever change the organization is making.²⁷

While Leonard and Yorton may not have had churches or Christian institutions in mind when they wrote these words about leaders and organizations, they certainly fit. Somehow, many Christian institutions operate with a deep-seeded notion that because they are Christian and do the work of God, there should be no discomfort, irreverence or even comedic silliness about their work. Where did that come from? According to the Gospels, Jesus spent most of his time with twelve other men. Certainly there were jokes, quirks, irreverence and laughter. They were human. And as previously mentioned,

²⁷ Ibid., 116-117.
humans are invited to “play,” enjoy and lean into the glorious abundance of God’s creation. Christian institutions are not immune from comedy. In fact, if they were honest with themselves, they would recognize they actually operate within a deep well of comedic fodder that can provide both humor and opportunity to examine and shift long held habits and mindsets.

The Second City teaches their improvisers and comedians to be unafraid to tackle power, to challenge conventions and question rules and assumptions through a technique called “Dare to Offend.”  

28 It is akin to a line Bishop Will Willimon enjoys repeating about the significant role of the pastoral leader in creating discomfort. He says, “if you leave church on Sunday feeling good, your preacher failed.”

29 Considering many of the deep trends discussed in Chapter One, many Christian institutions are hesitant to trust their people with the hard truths stemming from social complexities and the intersections of wicked problems. Membership and loyalty are no longer assumptions, therefore organizations are prone to hesitate taking risks which could incur losses. And yet, if an institution takes itself too seriously, The Second City heralds a warning: “if you're too reverent toward your product or service when embarking on innovation, you'll be too timid to take on substantial change. You'll love what exists more than the possibility of creating something better.”

30 The distance required to look with a different lens at an

\[\text{\footnotesize 28 Ibid., 15.}\]


\[\text{\footnotesize 30 Leonard and Yorton, Yes, And, 125. While this is true, balance must be sought between enough irreverence to reveal hidden truths and appropriate amounts of respect for tradition, although not so much that we lose sight of why the tradition exists.}\]
institution encourages a reconsideration of long-standing beliefs and practices that may be preventing innovation.

Those who practice traditioned innovation know past successes do not necessarily equate to success in the future. Experimenting, failing safely, succeeding, practicing the power of “Yes, And” and working as ensembles are critical habits to cultivate as the church improvises and innovates its way into the future. Deep trends and wicked problems create new challenges for leaders and institutions to navigate. Tradition is needed for the foundation upon which leaders help their institutions improvise their way to innovative expressions of their mission.

Christ sets the example for us. He is the embodiment of “Yes, And.” Christ knew his death was not the end of the story. Therefore when the church practices saying “Yes, And,” it is faithfully imitating Christ. And we imitate Christ into a future without fear, even with all of the wicked problems and deep trends plaguing Christian institutions. “The end is our beginning” enables institutions to try multiple experiments and learn from manageable failures because each improvisational act, each innovation, is a step closer toward the reign of God. Wells writes,

The church's faith is that, in story, sacrament, and spirit, God has given his people all that they need to live with him. The church’s creative energies are largely concerned with preparing its members to be able to respond by habit to unforeseeable turns of events. It is not the church’s role to speculate on what the future may hold. The church’s task is to be prepared for whatever the future may bring. It prepares through discipleship to be open to grace.

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32 Ibid., 48.
Earlier in this chapter, Wells calls the Christian community to brave action writing, “improvisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its tradition in new and often challenging circumstances; and this is exactly what the church is called to do.”33 I believe the church is called to protect, bless and support experiments long enough to let some of them bear fruit. This includes providing a safe place to learn from failures and scale successes. Christian institutions are poised to create ensembles that trust each other and can adapt to contextual challenges. And the church would do well to create a theology of “Yes, And” imitating the life and love of Christ. There is so much potential waiting to be tapped. Using the language of integrative thinking, there are third, fourth and fifth ways of reframing problems and models to best meet the needs of a community. Improvisation provides valuable habits and practices for leaders to guide and form their people with mindsets shaped by traditioned innovation. The church is called to practice traditioned innovation. The church is called to integrate and improvise.

33 Ibid., 12.
Chapter 5: Where do we go from here?

In light of the deep trends and wicked problems facing Christian institutions today, it is no surprise that many leaders are less confident about the future than they once were. Many late Boomers and Gen X leaders, recently rising to the top of their organizations, experienced the Golden Era of Christian institutions as children. They know what full church pews look like and how quickly a Habitat for Humanity house can be built by a Sunday School class. Many of them were there anytime the church doors were open, regardless of the day of the week, and they spent their Saturdays with their family and friends at a community soup kitchen or another worthy cause. Why would anyone think it would ever change? It was the church!

Things are changing quickly. The number of Americans with no religious affiliation continues to rise. Fewer young people are going to church. Distrust in religious institutions is growing. The effects of the latest recession have placed greater burdens on religious institutions in a time of shrinking resources. These issues are not specific to the United States, they are global. Three years ago, Benedict XVI became the first pope to resign in six centuries. Citing health reasons, the eighty-seven year old expressed he did not feel he had the strength of mind and body necessary to oversee the church in such rapid changes and in the face of such complex and deeply vexing questions for the church and its members. If the Pope feels ill-equipped in leading a religious institution, what does that mean for the rest of us?

Today many Christian institutional leaders experience more of a sense of paralysis than pride. The path forward is unclear and the methods and practices of past
successes no longer work. The challenges are bigger and it is becoming evident no individual institution can solve them on their own. Collaboration and partnership are no longer luxuries, they are methods of survival. Leaders today are equipped with technological tools of convenience and speed the likes of no other generation and yet at the same time, when the extreme variations of the deep trends facing institutions intersect, unforeseen wickedness results.

More than a few skeptics are proclaiming it is too late for many churches. Doors are closing and there are more to follow, they believe. “‘It’s no longer a matter of tweaking a few things,’ it is a matter of reinventing yourself, almost revitalizing yourself, from ground zero.”¹ In some ways this reinventing is already happening evidenced by new kinds of communal gathering such as Theology on Tap groups meeting in pubs. But they are not working from “ground zero.” This is where the skeptics miss the mark. “Ground zero” is not a place humans will ever go with the Church. “Ground zero” is God’s love story with the world lived out in creation. God’s innovation of “ground zero” belongs to God alone, thus everything humanity does to follow builds on God’s original innovation in creation. And thanks be to God our work does not begin from scratch. We are tasked to continue God’s good work in the world, to tell and retell the greatest love story ever told, and to gather together to bear witness to God’s reign as God, through us, conforms the world to Christ.

There are signs of hope springing forth among new forms of gathering as Millennials reinvent and recreate institutions to meet their needs. The *How We Gather* study from Harvard Divinity School references several thriving and life-giving community-based institutions growing out of Millennials’ needs for purpose, community and making a difference. While most of these institutions do not profess any religious affiliations, many of them find their roots in church-based ministries.

Institutions like CrossFit, The Dinner Party and Live in the Grey\(^2\) are meeting the needs of some Millennials and connect members to worthy causes and encourage significant personal and professional achievements. This is where many Millennials are finding their sense of community, purpose and accountability. And this is what the study has to say about faith communities:

> Traditional faith communities are valuable partners in this work. They offer immeasurable spiritual wisdom for a changing world, and also know, better than anyone, how the world is changing. But it may be more difficult for them to innovate within a system that is struggling.\(^3\)

We are “valuable partners.” These new thriving institutions acknowledge faith communities have something they do not. They also know the struggles within our structures to innovate and do what they are doing. These institutions are doing what used

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\(^2\) For a complete list of these emerging institutions, see Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, “How We Gather,” at https://caspertk.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/how-we-gather.pdf (accessed April 4, 2016).

\(^3\) Ibid., 20.
to belong in the wheelhouse of Christian institutions, and now we are their “valuable partners.”

This is both good and bad news. The bad news is that many Christian institutions have lost sight of critical community needs which are now being met by other institutions. The good news is that Christian institutions may be a bit behind, but all is not lost, as the skeptics profess. Christian institutions can harness the creative energies of God’s children, those created in God’s image to think integratively and improvise their way to experiments in discerning ways to better meet the needs of our constantly changing and increasingly complex communities. We can partner with these thriving innovative models of gathering and we can do better through our tradition and our call to innovation.

Even though most churches and Christian institutions know innovation is greatly needed in light of the deep trends and wicked problems facing their beloved models, change is still hard. With the last recession, institutional budgets have suffered. As the institutions get leaner, it seems the fights within them get meaner. Folks tend to argue fiercely over smaller and less important matters because they sense their overall influence declining.

Fewer financial resources, dwindling attendance, alternative institutions appealing to the much sought after Millennials, and change lurking at every turn naturally has churches and Christian institutions on edge. And since most of the church is made up of

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4 This is not to say there are not any churches or Christian institutions who do what these emerging institutions do. Certainly there are. But many churches and institutions have missed this boat. Others have simply lost ground.
Baby Boomers and those who are older, the deep trends facing Christian institutions only add to their anxiety about the future. To them it feels as if technology is taking over the world. Certainly it has its advantages, but to them it also feels as if it is stealing away more than it contributes. The younger generations are heading to cities in droves, leaving behind the simpler lives (and values) of their upbringing. The Boomers notice that depression is on the rise; loneliness appears to be an epidemic and deep meaningful relationships that are much enjoyed and coveted among their generation are rare among their children and grandchildren. They wonder what in the world is happening.

These concerns also cause anxiety within Christian institutions as they faithfully do their best to contribute to solutions out of love for God and neighbor. But as discussed in Chapter Two, wicked problems have no reliable structure, patterns or outcomes. In fact, the only constant about wicked problems is that they will change and morph with varying levels of uncertainty and complexity. As such, adaptability is critical to create the conditions for crafting generative solutions. Observation and shared understanding are needed to grasp the effects of deep trends and wicked problems in individual contexts. Empathy is a critical skill for comprehending how those in our care are feeling and determining appropriate responses. Such pastoral leadership skills are only recently being named and described so that those with these specific capacities, or the ability to learn them, are being cultivated into leadership. Today wicked problems and other institutional issues call for more human, relational soft skills. Holy Spirit-inspired communication, adaptability, empathy, observation and creating conditions for experiments and shifts in
mindsets and structures of traditional ways of seeing and doing things are critical Christian institutional leadership skills to innovate within today’s challenges.

One of the most pastoral gifts Christian institutional leaders can give their people is continually to recast and reframe their role in God’s ongoing story of innovation within God’s creation. Change brings anxiety and fear; at the same time change is constantly happening as God does a new thing throughout our institutions. Seeing one’s role as an agent of God’s innovation in the world is a much more palatable and active role than perceiving one is on the receiving end of change happening to them and their surroundings. Cultivating a mindset of traditioned innovation then becomes both a Godly practice and, more importantly, a gift of grace.

One of the primary tasks of a Christian institutional leader is to hold the space within the Christian tradition and Biblical narrative for both the children of God and their institutions to react, respond and adapt to the uncertainty and complexity challenging them on a daily basis. The space that leaders hold is one their forbearing leaders also held. The place is one of recognition and reflection in which God’s people can live, adapt, sometimes wander, and always find themselves welcomed home. The space is where traditioned innovation happens. It is also a place of creativity, experimentation, empathy, shared understanding and innovation. Traditioned innovation is the way God has been innovating in the world since creation. God continues to build on what God first created, offering more and different ways of connecting to God. This is evidenced most clearly in God’s gift of Jesus Christ. When Christian institutions reframe their mission, message and work in traditioned innovation, they speak the language many Millennials
are seeking and creating in other institutions. Christian institutions have always been and always will be called to traditioned innovation.

As we look forward and bring with us the best of our tradition, it bears asking, what is it that our eyes are gazing upon in the future? With secular institutions, the answer is typically the accumulation of capital, influence or whatever else it is by which they measure success. As discussed in Chapter One, Millennials seek after community, meaning and a sense of purpose. The object of Christians’ gaze is not as foreign as Millennials think it is because the telos for Christians, our purpose, our end is the reign of God. We live and love because God first loved us. Christian institutions are at their best when their focus is set on God’s reign, and the past, present and future follow a framework informed by the end.

“The end is our beginning” is a key phrase in this work because it describes the motives, the reasons for living and leading as children of God. The telos, purpose, reason for leading Christian institutions is rooted in God and God’s reign on earth. It is what forms the answer to our Why? when we question our work or our existence. It is what fuels the work when we become weary, and it gathers community when we realize we have mistakenly tried to take on kingdom work alone. At the same time, “the end is our beginning” can be a challenging concept to communicate to those who have not grown up in the church or have a foundation of church tradition upon which to draw.

A contemporary example of the telos concept is the buzz that circulated for weeks after British actor Alan Rickman died in early 2016. While famous for many cinematic roles, he was best known as the Potions Professor Severus Snape in the blockbuster series
Harry Potter. As filming began for the first movie, only three of the seven books had been written. This left author J. K. Rowling as the only one knowing how the story would end. She needed Professor Snape’s character to develop with a secret revealed only in what would become the seventh and final book. Rowling told Rickman what he called a “tiny, little, left of field” detail to inform Snape’s character development.

In the days following Rickman’s death, millions of YouTube hits came to versions of a fourteen minute video of snippets from all seven movies with pivotal points of Snape’s character showing the role the secret played in the interactions between Professor Snape and Harry Potter. Rickman even went so far as to correct the directors on the set of Harry Potter films when they wanted him to do something that he felt was out of line with Snape’s character, having in mind the secret only he and Rowling shared.

Rowling kept her focus on the end of the Harry Potter series while writing all seven books. The way the story ends informs every chapter of every book. With Snape in a pivotal role, the glimpse of what was to come in the end informed how his character developed in each film. Interestingly though, it was up to Rickman to interpret what the “tiny, little, left of field” detail meant or how it would affect his character’s development in the overall storyline. Rickman took the glimpse of the end and improvised his way into one of the most influential roles in the series. Rickman’s character was dark, twisted, conflicted and most of all incredibly complex because his life as Professor Snape was informed by a secret revealed only at the story’s end.

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So it is with Christian leaders’ vision of the end informing not only our past, but the way we live in the present. Having even the tiniest, little, left field glimpse into what the reign of God will look like at the end sheds vast light into the way we see history and the way we ought to live in the present and into the future. The good news is that we have more than a little glimpse. God has revealed God’s self to us in Jesus Christ. While the intimate details of the reign of God may not be known to us, the life and love of Jesus Christ is, better informing and shaping the way we live and lead. We can create multiple ways to move forward and improvise, holding in tension the tradition of the church and Scripture with the glimpse God has given us in Jesus Christ to live boldly into the reign of God.

The telos frames and shapes the story; it does not determine it. Sometimes the church behaves as if it is responsible for bringing about the reign of God. The church is part of the ongoing story bearing witness to God’s reign. It is not responsible for the end of it, just as it was not responsible for the beginning. The story from beginning to end is about God. Humans are neither the creators nor the completion of God’s story.6 This is actually the best news humans could receive. We are invited to participate in God’s ongoing story of love and redemption of God’s creation. We are not responsible for its outcome. The end belongs to God alone. Our responsibility lies in doing the best we can with the “glimpses” we have been given as our contributions to God’s creation. Collectively, each glimpse contributes as to a puzzle, revealing more of the magnificence and splendor of God’s reign. Recall the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians when

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he writes, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I
know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

We are called, in faithfulness to God, to hold the past and the future in tension as
we live authentically and boldly in the present as a sign of God’s reign. Part of our call is
to live and love in as big and unconditional ways as God does which calls for
interdisciplinary habits and practices to stretch our human finite capacities “abundantly
far more than all we can ask or imagine” and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s
conforming our mindsets to those formed in traditioned innovation. In doing this, we are
imitating Christ. We imitate Christ when we faithfully practice improvisation and
continue dialogue outside our comfort zones by saying “Yes, And.” We see the work of
the church in its purest communal form when it provides safe spaces to experiment, fail
safely and learn how to best love and care for one another as God loves us. These
practices help us reframe difficult conversations into productive discussions about virtues
and values, something about which the church has much to contribute.

Encouraging Experimentation and Providing Safe Places to Fail

Providing safe places for appropriate experimentation is one of the healthiest,
most productive and grace-filled gifts a church can give a community. The local church,

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7 I Corinthians 3:12, NRSV.

8 Ephesians 3:20-21, NRSV.

9 Recall the work of Martin’s Pro Pro chart to discern shared virtues and values to guide conversations
when facing opposing models.
in its current form, is itself an ongoing experiment. Certainly the earthly Jesus did not
craft plans for lofty cathedrals or worship services structured to accommodate a specific
neighborhood demographic. The church, through the work of the Holy Spirit, has evolved
as the contexts and generations have changed. Some things have remained the same and
have become part of the treasured tradition. Other areas have experienced significant
innovation. Experimenting with how to tell the old story in new ways is the epitome of
traditioned innovation. Part of experimentation then includes retelling the old story
through both new and re-created institutions whose mission is to bear witness to the reign
of God on earth.

The book of Numbers tells the story of the Israelites experimenting their way
through forty years in the wilderness. They learned to trust God, and at times they
experimented in some of the wrong directions. They, much like children do, pushed with
boundaries and learned how strict God was with God’s instructions. They experimented
with worshiping Baal and learned a perilous lesson. And some of their experiments went
better than others as they learned about God’s tolerance, forgiveness, abundance and
provision. The wilderness wandering was a time of flux and change for the Israelites as
they negotiated new relationships with each other, the land, their traditions, their new
leaders and God. The wilderness provided the space for them to stretch boundaries, create
and rebuild institutions, test the waters and figure out what would work for them as they
continued their journey to the Promised Land.

Christian institutions are also in continual states and stages of adaptation as they
negotiate their relationships with their community, with who is and who is not entering
their buildings and engaging their models, and how they participate in the ongoing story of God’s love for the world. No institution or individual has or will perfect the model for how to most authentically or effectively live out God’s mission in the world in our dynamic contexts. The best we can do is commit to encourage, support and participate in collaborative experiments, scale the successes and learn from the failures in an ongoing iterative process of traditioned innovation. In his book *Improvisation*, Wells sees those who creates safe places for failure as ones who envelops failure and redemption into the ongoing narrative of being in relationship with God and others. He emphasizes community as a safe space for God’s children to step out in faith and innovate within God’s unfaltering tradition of love and grace for them. This work is in the Church’s wheelhouse.

“*Yes, And*” *Falling in Love*

The practices of “Yes, And” and falling in love are also in the wheelhouse of Christian institutions as we are the beneficiaries of God’s lavish and abundant love and forgiveness. These practices are also among the most significant takeaway for effectively practicing integrative thinking and improvisation toward cultivating a mindset of traditioned innovation. “And” is also key to our Why?, our purpose and the way God continues to reconcile and redeem us through our sinful natures. Most importantly, “and” is the key to our salvation and eternal life because Christ died, and Christ rose and Christ will come again. Wells assures us that it is a promise of God’s unfailing love for us as “it indicates that the sentence is not finished. The story is not yet over. There is more to
come, even when evil has done its worst.”\textsuperscript{10} Adding “Yes” to our already powerful “And,” allows us truly to imitate Christ in our attitudes and actions.

We are, in a sense, obligated to respond to our brothers and sisters in Christ with “Yes, And” because using that phrase is proof of our acceptance that the story does not belong to us. Humans are characters in God’s grand story; and the end is our beginning. Our contribution to the story is in how we innovate within our traditions to keep the story going. We say “Yes, And” because God said it in creation and Christ said it on the cross. We keep the story going, even though it will continue regardless of our participation, because we are called to embody the story by conforming ourselves and the world to Christ.\textsuperscript{11} We keep the story going and we expand it as we invite others to participate with us in God’s good news.

Unfortunately, too often we limit, instead of expand our opportunities to express the good news of God’s story. Traditional educational practices promote simplification and speed which leads to a prevalence of limited and binary thinking habits. But limiting one’s thinking to either/or options is not living into the full and abundant life of God’s reign. From my experience in church and Christian institutional leadership, jumping to conclusions and making quick attempts to tame wicked problems presents limited binary options as the only way forward. There is always a winner and a loser. Certainly this is not God’s vision for how we ought to live and love each other.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 110.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 105.
In leading integrative thinking exercises with clergy and Christian institutional leaders, I have seen time and time again the power of what Roger Martin calls “falling in love” with opposing models. When stakeholders are truly invested in a process and committed to finding innovative paths for their institution, the results are nothing short of miraculous. This is something I want to integrate further into the way I see the world. I want to take the time to not just consider opposing models, but fall in love with them to further cultivate understanding and empathy with my brothers and sisters in Christ. In Wells’ words, I want to develop the “discipline and training provided… to engage in the unexpected.”¹²

Strong Christian leaders question not only presenting opposing models, but also their own thinking about models because they know if they are not aware of their own thinking, how it happens and what comes of it, they cannot alter it. One of the best ways to think about one’s thinking is to opening oneself to critiquing and questioning long held structures, cultural givens and standards of thought. This can maximize the quality of one’s thinking and challenge long held thought processes which have been engrained in institutions and systems for generations. To this end, strong Christian leaders practice and train others to practice balcony time- helping them step back and see the bigger picture. They help those around them situate their story in God’s story by taking a larger and longer look.

A few closing thoughts…. What may lie ahead.

¹² Ibid., 79.
Any significant shift in tectonic plates beneath the church comes with potential challenges and opportunities. Some think the doors of the Church are ultimately going to close. They see the hemorrhaging of the pews as too devastating to be able to recover or retain a meaningful constituency. But these are people who see the story of churches and Christian institutions as belonging to the Church alone. The Church knows it is a central part of God’s much bigger story. Therefore while the Church may feel discouraged at times and at a loss for what to do in the face of the deep trends and wicked problems plaguing their pews, they know the Church will continue to gather because the Church is innately communal. Christians know they can always accomplish more together in their efforts of conforming the world to Christ than they ever could alone. Regardless of the severity of the tectonic shifts rumbling beneath the church in any age, the utmost truth will always be that the Church belongs to God, it is not left to human devices.

So what lies ahead for the local church and Christian institutions? If Millennials are attracted to the Church’s mission but are not comfortable in what they see as decaying models, what kind of future models will emerge? Some think that as the Church re-creates itself for the next generations, it will become less model-centric and more mission focused. The mission of the Church has survived through generations of challenges and times of growth and flourishing. The mission of the Church is still present in all of the decaying models which turn off the Millennials; it is buried beneath years of policies, renovations, flashy programming, enormous screen projectors and too many coffee and bagel bars. The models must move aside for their mission to take center stage, where they should have been all along.
I believe Christian institutions that engage in habits and practices like those found in interdisciplinary frameworks like integrative thinking and improvisation will experiment in new ways of gathering as the body of Christ. I foresee these gatherings as being outsider and stranger-centric; there will be open and welcoming invitations into casual and unassuming settings. The Church will be much more present in the world, meeting the needs of their communities, working for social justice and offering empathy to one’s neighbors because they are ways we bear witness to the reign of God, not because it is required or expected. Priorities will rest in the church meeting the needs of people, as well as people meeting the needs of the church. The Church will improvise its way through culture shifts and different community contexts just as the first century church did in its days of truly divine flourishing.

I believe the church should and will learn from Millennials in their desire to have all of the areas of their lives integrated. They see their work, home, personal, social and spiritual lives all linked together. As such, the church of the future will be simplified so that busy working families will not feel like church is one more thing added to an already taxing and overscheduled week. Christian institutions in the future will not compete for time with stakeholders and perspective members, but instead will equip them to be advocates for Christ and influencers in their community because of how and with whom they choose to invest their precious time.

These and other changes will come about because strong Christian leaders faithfully engage their institutions in habits and practices which cultivate the conditions

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13 I do not mean to insinuate this does not exist in some places already, but that this kind of community commitment will become more of the norm in the next generations of the Church.
for traditioned innovation to flourish. Integrative thinking and improvisation are only two of many interdisciplinary options for creating new and innovative ways to point through the deep trends and wicked problems and to the reign of God. Collaborative partnerships will strengthen relationships and efforts as Christian communities share challenges and resources not just out of necessity, but because it is what Christian institutions are called to do as instruments of God’s reign. The path ahead is clearly littered with naysayers who believe in a limited and finite story of the Church. Thanks be to God that is not the real story. We are a small chapter of a much larger and magnificent story paved with tradition, empathy, forgiveness, hope and love. God’s ongoing love story with creation is ours to bear witness to and embody through our call to traditioned innovation and improvisation from beginning to end. Because the end is our beginning.
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BIOGRAPHY

Victoria Atkinson White is the Managing Director of Grants at Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School. She is passionate about helping Christian institutions and their leaders create the space for traditioned innovation and the movement of the Holy Spirit as God leads in new and exciting experiments in the church. With roots in the Deep South, she grew up in Louisiana, Alabama and Texas. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies at Rhodes College, a Master of Divinity from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, and a Master of Theology from Duke Divinity School. For eight years, Victoria was a chaplain at the 900-resident Westminster Canterbury Community in Richmond, Virginia. Before that, she worked as Minister to Alumni at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. She is an ordained minister affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Victoria lives in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with her husband, Reverend Doctor Mark D. White. They share two children, Ava and Owen and a very large Great Dane, Minnie.