Keeping it Beta: Social Innovation & The Black Church
A Case for Strategy, Design & Social Change

By

Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes

Date: 4/11/2022
Approved

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

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God created . . . and it was good. People of faith are a part of God’s work of creation that from the beginning of time has created and innovated without fail. A mantra of the ecumenical Black Church is that we serve a God who “keeps making a way out of no way!” Out of conditions of scarcity, malice, and hardship, enslaved Africans living in America created possibilities and opportunities for themselves. Fast forward to 2022, and that spirit of innovation still exists within the stories and lived experiences of African Americans across time.

In this work I will suggest that innovation must continue to be an intentional practice of the black church. Given the monumental changes brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, I am compelling leaders to move towards the work of innovation and to illuminate opportunities of innovation within church environments. I would argue that the ecumenical Black Church has led many movements of social impact and connectivity yet our language for describing that kind of work has been too limited. I’m interested in narrating and interpreting the work of the ecumenical Black Church through the lens and discipline of social innovation, traditioned innovation, design thinking, and strategy.

We are at an intersection and inflection point in 2022. Virtual sanctuaries have replaced physical ones. The average parishioner has not walked into a sanctuary in the past two years. How does that change our concept of innovation, outreach and strategy? As a former publicist, current brand strategist, and church planter, I am very interested in the way the ecumenical Black Church is being received in society right now. I’m interested in threading who the ecumenical Black Church has been and who it can be. This is a renaissance moment. Let’s join together and see what we can create. Let’s dream together.
DEDICATION

To my Mother: I dedicate this work to my mother, Reverend Dr. Gwendolyn Long Cudjoe. When I was thirteen years old, she graduated with her Doctor of Ministry degree from The Houston Graduate School of Theology. Less than a year later, she was hired as the Dean of the Chapel at Paul Quinn College in Dallas, TX where she made history in that appointment as the first woman in that seat. Throughout her career she has served as an ordained itinerant elder in the 1st District of The African Methodist Episcopal Church, the head of the Religion Departments at both Paul Quinn College & Jarvis Christian College, a former Associate Pastor at St. Luke Community United Methodist Church, and so much more. Without my mom’s continual motivation, I never would have gone down this path. I am honored to walk in her footsteps and to stand in her legacy. She is retired now but is my forever pastor and the first theologian I ever met.

To my Husband: I also dedicate this work to my husband, Rev. Andrew Wilkes. He and I celebrate twelve years of marriage and seventeen years together this year. He has been my deepest confidant, my continual cheerleader and my one and only love. I thank him for the sacrifices he has made for me to make space for me to finish this doctorate. He knew I could do this even before I believed I could. I love you sweetheart.
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INTRODUCTION

Innovation and strategy are two core concepts that people put into action every day. They may not realize it, but every time folks discover new possibilities for old problems, they’ve entered the world of innovation. When a toddler discovers their parent’s pots and pans and beats them with spoons, they are in the act of creating an innovative substitute for a drum set. The child might beat aimlessly until they discover their ability to beat with syncopation. That syncopation creates a cadence. That intentionally repeated cadence becomes a song. When they go back the next day to do the same thing, they’ve now unleashed a new strategy. Once they know how they strategically want their pots and pans to sound, their innovative solution becomes a reliable solution to making music. We all have the internal capacity to innovate. You’ve likely done it without giving yourself the right attribution for your own brilliance.

My writing advisor, Dr. L. Gregory Jones framed it this way when I asked him what he saw as the biggest difference between strategy and innovation. He offered that, “all innovation requires strategy, but not all strategy is innovative.”

In this thesis, I will advance the cause and case for the ecumenical Black Church to prioritize the work of strategic innovation in a way that intentionally remains in the beta stage. Beta is defined as a nearly complete prototype of a product.¹ So when I indicate that I believe the ecumenical Black Church should prioritize the work of strategic innovation while keeping it in the beta stage, what I am advocating for is an opportunity for the work of innovation to never become

¹ Merriam Webster https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beta
so predictable that our strategies are stale and outdated. There’s an ongoing nature to this work that must be adopted. The key to innovation is the willingness to continually revisit and hone it.

A fair question that you might be asking while reading this is, why the ecumenical Black Church? Isn’t innovation a universal need among churches of all races and organizations beyond the church universal? The answer is, absolutely. Innovation is a broad topic that has its place in various industries and disciplines. This project is focused on the ecumenical Black Church because that is the context that I serve and it is the context that I’ve been a part of, my entire life. I was born as a preacher’s kid. My mother preached her first sermon in the African Methodist Episcopal Church when I was a toddler. As the story goes, I ran up to the pulpit while she was preaching. The ecumenical Black Church has been in my life for as long as I can remember. It is with both love and concern for this institution that I dedicate this project.

In this thesis I will share introductory glimpses of the research of our business sector colleagues in the disciplines of design thinking, strategy, and consumer behavior. This is to offer core interdisciplinary best practices to better serve the work of innovation and strategic visioning within the ecumenical Black Church. Keeping it beta helps congregations to get adjusted to the work of ongoing honing of the strategies and practices that are put forth. For clarity, when I use the term ecumenical Black Church, I am speaking of the historically Black Church that was founded across various denominations, in response to creating a spiritual home where African Americans can worship freely, free from racial injustice and free for the work of liberation for black lives.

Professor Anthony Pinn in his book, *What Has the Black Church to Do with Public Life*, raises the point that, “For a good number of years now, it [the Black Church] has been a central symbol of African American organizational creativity and broad thought—producing and
spreading a meta-narrative of productive struggle for a deep sense of humanity. The ecumenical Black Church has long been a space of creativity and formation for those who are interested in using thought and imagination to dream up a world that did not yet exist. Black Church folks are dreamers. They are innovators. Historically, they have been people who come to the four walls of the church to make their struggle productive, in the words of Anthony Pinn. What a concept. If we must struggle, where can we produce something better out of it? As Plato once said, “our need will be the real creator.” Perhaps it is not strange that marginalized and oppressed people have become so innovative. When you don’t have what you need, you make substitutes and provisions. Sometimes those substitutes turn out to be better than the original model you were working with. I think it is fair to say that when pushed to innovate, the ecumenical Black Church created a model of spiritual formation, communal outreach and talent incubation that rivals any other nonprofit space across sectors. Still, in 2022, we find ourselves with the gift of the history of the ecumenical Black Church but the challenge of the current possibilities for the ecumenical Black Church. The question is, is the ecumenical Black Church still innovating? Is anyone doing a pulse check and or assessment of how these churches are doing? I believe the churches themselves should be monitoring their own impact. Who better to assess the ecumenical Black Churches’ impact than the Black Church itself? In this thesis, I will make a case for keeping strategic innovation beta and for taking stock of how these churches are cultivating and curating innovators within their own environment.

The task before congregations is to do the work of what I’m calling the PPT methodology: P (plant), P (prune) and T (tend). This methodological concept was born after a conversation I held with my advisor where he told me a story about how one tends a rose garden. After the seeds have been planted and the roses begin to bloom, they must be pruned. The element of this strategy that surprised me was the idea that in order to prune well, sometimes roses that look healthy must be cut down so that they can grow stronger.

That is the work. To plant, prune, and tend to the faith-based religious institutions that have been launched in the world. I am a church planter in Brooklyn, New York. I planted my church in 2018 but prior to that I worked on the pastoral staff of a church that was nearly 200 years old. In both instances, the brand-new church and the historic church, the ongoing work of plant, prune and tend was necessary to sustain the thriving and relevance of our institutions. Plant, Prune, Tend is a pragmatic approach to keeping strategic innovation in the beta phase. It also gives churches the agency to assess their own work.

The argument that I am advancing in this work is that systems need to be evaluated and updated with regularity to match the pace of our times. I am interested in how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted organizations and institutions with deeply engaged audiences. I will lift a few case studies on companies that have been faced with the need to pivot and found ways to strategically innovate internally in a way that was sustainable. What did they plant to keep up their relevance? How did they prune? What did tending look like? What did they learn? What values came up to the surface? Where was strategic innovation needed to bolster the ongoing mission of their organization?

For many organizations, the PPT methodology will assist in keeping their “why” the same, while interrogating their how. In other words, I am not suggesting that the “why” of an organization
should remain in beta, but I am suggesting that the “how” should remain in beta. Why you do what you do, typically does not change. It is the “why” that drives us. Our “why” is what gets us out of bed in the mornings. Our “why” animates our passions towards strategically innovating in the first place. But our “how” must remain in beta. We must be open to continually honing the tools we use to accomplish our “how.” How we reach people in 2022 must be different from how we reached them in 2000. Our imagination must be continually prodded to ensure that we are granting permission to individuals and institutions to dream big – without restrictions.

In the words of Dr. L. Gregory Jones, one is more inclined to be innovative if they believe God is at work in the world. The work of continual strategic innovation honors the ongoing innovative work that God is up to. It emboldens imagination to continue thinking about what current needs can be met for the communities you serve, and it pushes you towards implementation. This thesis will explore the relationships between African American ecclesial history & community engagement, consumer behavior rhythms, and the best practices around design thinking, strategic visioning and strategic innovation implementation. I will be looking at case studies, social change patterns, and stories of Black founders to piece together a bird’s eye view of how strategic innovation roots itself in varying kinds of businesses and organizations.

My goal with this work is to present a case for interdisciplinary approaches to serving the African American community in a way that is proactive rather than reactive to its present needs. Many people are discouraged because they view their personal problems as individual issues. As a result, they are ashamed to ask for the help that they need to make it from day to day. But I want to suggest that the needs of most individuals are not solely individualistic, they are communal. To put it in theological terms, God is a God of sufficiency. There is enough for everyone to have what they need to flourish. But systems and structures have hoarded opportunities, resources, and
accessibility. Strategic innovation takes a communal problem such as that and endeavors to design solutions so that the larger societal issues at hand are addressed. The ecumenical Black Church has always been interested in the shared struggle of its people. It has always sought out to make communal change. When you change the community, you change the individuals within in.

As mentioned above, much of the individual turmoil that African Americans face in this society is the result of collective, communal problems that require collective, communal responses. The ecumenical Black Church is a trusted communal leader with the organizational muscle to make strategic responses to the overarching needs of the communities it serves. In this thesis I will present the case that the societal issues that African Americans face are worthy of socially innovative ideas. These ideas are rooted in the theological belief that God is interested in the well-being and flourishing of all people. In this spirit, the ecumenical Black Church must innovate in a way that reflects what God wants for God’s people.

In this work we will look at the distinctions between the work of social innovation and its sister discipline, social entrepreneurship. We will look at the liminal spaces of survival and renewal for African Americans and see what role the ecumenical Black church can play in the need for safety, belonging and thriving. We will also look at people that I like to refer to as, divinely called innovators. Those are folks who show up across industries and sectors beyond faith-based institutions who perform their work through a faith-rooted lens and or a moral framework of pursuit of the common good. In each of these scenarios, I will be attentive to how they planted, pruned and tended to their own work and the work of the organizations and companies that they represent.

A driving theme of this work will be a reminder that the work of strategic social innovation is ongoing and must always be in dialogue with the needs of the people. At its best, social
innovation for the ecumenical Black Church will draw its inspiration from prophetic imagination. It will use every resource available to create God’s kingdom on earth, as it is in Heaven as the Lord’s prayer illustrates. And that work will be on-going. It never ends. It remains in beta.
CHAPTER ONE: LIMINAL SPACE AS AN ACT OF PRUNING

People of faith are a part of God’s work of creation that from the beginning of time has created and innovated without fail. A mantra of the ecumenical Black Church is that we serve a God who “keeps making a way out of no way!” I would say that innovation is in our DNA—out of conditions of scarcity, malice, and hardship, enslaved Africans living in America created robust lives for themselves – against all odds. They continually explored possibilities instead of being permanently paralyzed by their problems. Not only did they spark change as individuals, but they created institutions to bring about broader societal change. One of their greatest creations was the ecumenical Black Church.

The ecumenical Black Church has led many movements of social change and innovation. In the effort to survive, the Black Church led the way in strategic innovation by creating conditions for thriving for African American people across centuries. It was in the basement of an Atlanta church that Historically Black Colleges, Spelman and Morehouse were birthed. In the fellowship halls of southern churches, civil rights strategies were hatched. In the pulpits of brush harbor churches, enslaved Africans plotted revolution and resistance. On the backdrop of hardship, The Black Church incubated orators, singers, musicians, mutual aid societies, philanthropists, and more. W.E.B. DuBois once said,

“The church was all but supreme and absolute in the development of the race. It became the great agency in the progress of our people because it was the only institution over which we had control...all of the business of the black community originated in the church and that it served as a public forum for debating and developing strategy to deal with the social and political issues that confronted African Americans.”

DuBois’ point about the Black Church being the only entity that Black people could control leaves much to be curious about now that African Americans control various kinds of industries in 2022, including the ecumenical Black Church. Is the Black Church still able to innovate and incubate ideas for social and political issues or has it farmed that out to local organizations?

The work of the ecumenical Black Church has evolved but the need for it remains. To use the words from the introduction, the “why” of the ecumenical Black Church has not changed, but the “how” must. In thinking about the “why” of the ecumenical Black Church, I am reminded of the work of feminist activist bell hooks and her description of the liminal space. Bell hooks frames the conditions of African Americans and their search for the liminal space in her book *Belonging*.

“African Americans have a long history of struggling to stand as subjects in a place where the dehumanizing impact of racism works continually to make us objects. In our small-town segregated world, we lived in communities of resistance, where even the small everyday gesture of porch sitting was linked to humanization. Racist white folks often felt extreme ire when observing a group of black folks gathered on a porch. They used derogatory phrases like “porch monkey” both to express contempt and to once again conjure up the racist iconography linking blackness to nature, to animals in the wild. As a revolutionary threshold between home and street, the porch as liminal space could also then be a place of antiracist resistance.”

I see the work of strategic innovation as the ability to continue creating liminal space. Liminal space is inherently transitional. It’s continually in beta. Yet it provides a landing place for one’s emotions, thoughts, and dreams. It does not require one to live in that space for a lifetime, but it provides a soft place to land in the interim. If the porch that bell hooks describes can be a liminal space of antiracist resistance for black people, then the ecumenical Black Church can be too. Somewhere along the way however, the ecumenical Black Church stopped being that safe place of antiracist safety for all. Perhaps because in the interest of multiculturalism or color-blind

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existence, the ecumenical Black Church let its protective guard down. The problem is that racism did not.

America still has a race problem. African Americans are still in search of safe space. The work of strategic innovation can help create more liminal spaces of home and belonging for the black community amidst racial injustice. That kind of innovation will depend on brutal honesty, vulnerability and trust. There is not one permanent fix to responding to racial injustice in America. The work must remain in beta. The spaces created must be liminal, because the conditions facing the black community are not static. The issues change with the times. Across time some things become easier for the community and some things become harder. The work of strategic innovation is to be in continual assessment of what is working and what isn’t.

Part of the trust that the ecumenical Black Church still holds within the black community is due to its history of its social justice advocacy. People expect the ecumenical Black Church to get involved in causes for justice. Theologian Monica Coleman suggests that “a postmodern theological framework affirms that the present retains traces of the past. When we embrace the influence of the past and incorporate that influence into our becoming, we can be said to “positively” incorporate it.”

Incorporating the influence of the past and allowing it to influence the work of becoming is a form of pruning. The work of creating liminal spaces must give appropriate attention to our past as well as appropriate attention to the strategic visioning of our future. As Dr. Coleman

reminds us, we cannot separate the present from the past. The work of pruning helps organizations and institutions to adjust what is no longer working while keeping what has the capacity to work again. This task brings up the work of Dr. Jones and his research on traditioned innovation. In his words:

“Traditioned innovation honors and engages the past while adapting to the future because it forces us to ask fundamental questions about who we are and what purpose we have for existing: Who have we been, and now, in shifting circumstances, who will we continue to be? How will we stay true to the end, to which God calls us, while adapting to new circumstances? How do we ensure our “why” doesn’t change even as we innovate and adapt to changing circumstances?”

I’ll be working to thread the positive and negative dimensions of allowing our past to inform our future. As Dr. Monica Coleman puts it, “the past is incarnate in the present, whether we are conscious of it or not. This is a kind of preconscious memory.”

I’ll couple these ideas of Coleman’s preconscious memory and Jones’ traditioned innovation to show that I am not suggesting that we throw away the historical ways that we’ve chosen to innovate, but to rather prune what doesn’t work so that we might leave enough space for the good to grow in a healthy way. I recognize that the history we hold is a part of our present. Somewhere within the liminal space we create lies an opportunity to retain the best of our history and to release the most harmful. There also lies an opportunity to release those things that no longer fit. Just like the rose garden in Dr. Jones’ yard, every pruning does not have to be connected to things that harm but it is important to release things that no longer help or are not as fruitful as we need them to be. That too is the


kind of pruning that is worthy of our strategic innovation. In doing this work, we are leaning more closely to the conditions that God intends for us to have.

Larry Vincent puts it like this. “Innovating in the company of God just might direct our attention to what God is already doing for the common good and especially to those in whom God consistently expresses a particular interest: the vulnerable and dispossessed.” In this spirit, the act of pruning is an opportunity for the ecumenical Black Church to see where God is going, not just where God has been. “Successful innovating happens ‘at the seams’ where traditional boundaries are crossed—conceptual, academic and even geographic and cultural. Innovations cross boundaries between what was previously believed to be impossible, improbable or infeasible.”

This is the pruning work. And as we create continual liminal spaces that exist in beta, we grant permission to our congregations to continue working on strategies worthy of our implementation that honor the needs of our current society and those whom we serve.

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CHAPTER TWO: PANDEMIC PPT

PLANT. PRUNE. TEND

Before I go much further in this thesis, it’s important to name that I am writing this thesis in the midst of a global pandemic. The pandemic has been horrific. As a church geographically located in the heart of the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, we found ourselves in need of having to deploy the PPT methodology of plant, prune and tend. The pandemic hurried us across the globe towards a pruning and tending climate. Worldwide, faith-based institutions were forced to keep it beta. We all had to begin making decisions one decision at a time. No longer could we project several months ahead of time how we would be together as faith communities. We had to await the public health official’s guidance to ensure we were properly pruning and tending to the communities of faith that we led.

Over 700,000 individuals in America lost their lives to COVID-19. That cannot be overlooked. That kind of disruption to our status quo in 365 days is an insurmountable loss. That kind of pain and unexpected trauma is real. When people experience that level of heartbreak and have those kinds of questions of theodicy, they feel like they have no hope. When predictable rhythms that people have always been able to count on are no longer accessible to them, people panic.

As a pastor, I know that while people love their churches, they often take their churches for granted. People assume that the church will always be there for them when they need it. COVID-19 changed that. For the first time in centuries, the doors of America’s churches, were not open. People who had come to rely upon the physical church as a place that they could return to
whenever they saw fit, suddenly had to tune into YouTube streams and virtual zoom rooms to catch time with their pastors. Funeral services became 10 persons or fewer. Last rights of dying COVID-19 patients were given to parishioners by video calls or through glass windows in overcrowded hospital rooms. Multi-hundred person weddings were stripped down to clergy and couple. Communion was now done in people’s homes with their own supplies, vs. the communion bread and wine that was blessed by the pastors and disseminated in sanctuaries. Church as we knew it was disrupted in a way that no one ever thought possible.

Yet after the shock, after the metaphorical band aid was ripped off, something miraculous occurred. Suddenly, people began to innovate. Congregants began to adapt. 80-year-old parishioners learned how to tune in for virtual worship services. Choir members learned how to record themselves on their iPhones and send in their vocal parts for ministers of music to assemble virtual choirs. Audio-visual departments that had been begging for equipment upgrades were suddenly at the top of the church’s priority list for capital spending. In a fascinating way, people adjusted to the conditions presented, and found ways to preserve the things that meant the most to them. People remembered the “why” behind church and changed their “how.”

The core thing here is that much of this innovation happened strategically not organically. It would be tempting to assume that people instinctively and organically knew exactly how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic but that would be selling short what happened. Strategy was deployed. While it is true that no one had a fail-proof solution, pastors across the world created strategy. And those strategies were created in beta form. Suddenly, pastors across the globe decide to take things week by week. Announcements and decisions were made to congregations as public health data was made available to the general public. Pastors strategically sourced how they would receive their information and how they would put it to use. With that information at their fingertips,
pastors then began to strategically consider new approaches to creating and curating community that did not revolve around in person gatherings. Here is where we began to see many things innovatively dreamed up but kept in beta. Churches were willing to try things out and to assess how things did. In many ways, churches entered meta-experiences of plant, prune, tend that they repeated until they found rhythms that worked for them. People did not just fall into a new normal. Strategic innovation was deployed.

The pandemic PPT of plant, prune tend that we discussed in chapter 1 occurred almost on its own in the wake of COVID-19. People adapted and planted, pruned and tended to the new ways of being that the pandemic required them to experience. People learned how to keep it beta. People understood that plans that were announced from month-to-month were subject to change. New systems were trotted out within churches and were quickly pruned and tended based on both how the congregants reacted and what the public health guidelines required. In those early days of the pandemic, people kept in beta.

But then something fascinating happened. People began to get set in their pandemic rhythms. Suddenly, the new normal of prerecorded services, online church, zoom bible study and more became the new status quo. People learned the new way of doing things and quickly became quite accustomed to those new ways of being. They assumed that that was how things would be until the virus was obliterated. But that isn’t how innovation works. A July 2021 article from *Baptist News Global* on re-entry found that:

“Studies from the CDC and the American Psychological Association reveal anxiety increased more than 11% in the last year, and nearly half of all Americans reported feeling symptoms of anxiety or depression. The impact of economic uncertainty, political polarization and racial division added to our collective anxiety... A recent study by the *Harvard Business Review* found that 80% of remote workers do not want to return to the office full time, a tremendous shift from the 72% who wished to return to their offices
This is the kind of data that reminds us why we must keep innovation in the beta stage. After two years of working and worshipping from home, data suggests that people prefer the new normal that the pandemic forced us to create. As the old saying goes, ‘necessity is the mother of all invention.’ It is typically a dire need that causes people to think outside of the box. However, once that option is put before people, many people cut off the innovation stage and settle in to create new norms. But I would argue that true innovation takes several degrees of iteration. True innovation keeps it beta. Here we find ourselves, as The Baptist News Global article points out, in a period of needing to learn how to keep adapting innovative change. I would argue that the church universal has been doing a good job to rising to the occasion. It cannot stop now. There cannot be an assumption that the global pandemic is ending and we can therefore, forego, the changes we made while in crisis. The opposite is the case. People have grown to appreciate the accommodations made for them while we were in the height of the pandemic crisis. People don’t want those accommodations to be stripped away. This is a time for more imagination alongside our commitment to innovation.

This cycle of imagination is a key component of a concept that our business colleagues identify as design thinking. One of the core stages of design thinking is the ideate stage. Within that stage, the goal is to come up with as many potential and foreseeable options as possible to the situation at hand and to then choose the best option as the one you activate. That option is then

evaluated in a stage called prototyping and then it is tested. If it does not live up to the desired expectation that option is discarded and one returns to the ideation stage.

Part of the reason I believe it is so hard for the ecumenical Black Church to practice the cycle of ideation, prototyping and testing is that we assign moral value to people’s ideas prematurely. We get accustomed to prototyping the ideas that come our way, but rarely do we test the ideas. In other words, rarely do we keep it beta. This is the pruning stage of the PPT methodology that we discussed in Chapter 1. If we are not willing to prune our ideas and test them to see if they need to remain, we are not innovating, we are simply responding to problems with untested solutions. There must be another metric for testing our prototypes other than time.

**PLANT**

When we plant, we are in the metaphorical honeymoon stage of possibility. In the planting stage, we take chances on the possibilities we’ve dreamed up. The planting phase is the phase where we give ourselves and our institutions permission to try new things. It is the stage of our dreaming where we say phrases like, ‘what if we did…’ and ‘let’s just give this a try…’ The planting phase is a vulnerable phase. It’s the phase where we take our big ideas and try them out in the world.

I’m reminded of my work as a church planter. In 2018, I launched a church in Brooklyn, New York. The idea of planting or starting a church was exhilarating. We had a clean slate. Nothing held back our imagination. We dreamed big and dreamed out loud. The planting phase is a phase worthy of extravagant risks and grandiose dreams. In this phase, the goal is to start. Starting is half the battle with the planting phase. So many people get stuck in the ideating stage (as our design thinking colleagues would call it), and never move to the prototyping stage. They never plant. They never start.
How many of us have dreams jotted down in notebooks on the top shelves of our bookcases collecting dust? So many of us daydream and imagine about possibilities but are often too afraid to prototype/plant those ideas into the world. Interestingly enough – design thinking suggests that the ideate stage should be time-bound. The idea is that it’s not as hard to come up with an idea as we make it. Most people have opinions about things and are continually dreaming in their minds. Where most get stuck is in trying to decipher whether their ideas are good or not. We often shut down our own ideas before they ever have time to take shape because we fear the ideas are too small or simplistic. But when you put a time limit on how long one can spend on ideating before they are required to prototype/plant, it gives one time not get stuck in their heads, but to simply think out loud and give things a try.

The conditions of the pandemic forced leaders to move through this kind of thinking much more quickly. Leaders found themselves at the nexus of needing to ideate and reimagine possibilities without much time to prototype. Leaders had to try new things and assess as they went along. They had to plant new ideas and see what worked and discard what didn’t. They didn’t have the luxury of sitting on their hands and not making decisions. Too many lives were in the balance. They had to plant new ideas. They had to try new things. They had to innovate. It was okay if those ideas didn’t become permanent, but it was not okay for leaders to be without suggestion of a possible way forward. In other words, they had to plant something.

Planting is scary because it requires us to try things out loud. Innovation is scary because it requires us to publicly try things that haven’t been done before. Therefore most of our innovation occurs on the backend of tragedy because people are typically in a ‘what do we have to lose’ mindset when they’ve lived through traumatic experiences. When your entire harvest is decimated, you have no choice but to plant again. When your harvest is plentiful, you might forget about the
importance of planting your seeds for the next season’s harvest. In the same way, innovation requires us to remember to continually plant new ideas, new possibilities, and new options. Innovation occurs as we continually ideate, prototype, and test.

I am fascinated by the number of successful entrepreneurs and founders who share similar stories of never expecting their ideas/companies/institutions to take off in the way they did. Many of them started/planted their ideas and to their surprise, they caught on. While there are countless black founders, I want to lift up the stories of three: Imani Ellis of The Creative Collective, Culture Con, Sarah Jakes Roberts, co-pastor of ONE: Potter’s House Church LA & Founder of Woman Evolve Ministry Imprint, and Support Black Colleges Co-Founders, Corey Arvinger & Justin Phillips.

“When asked by Forbes about the beginning of her company, Ellis replied: “The Creative Collective was born in my one-bedroom in Harlem. I invited a few friends over and we all went around the room, sharing what we were going through and what resources we needed to succeed. It felt so cathartic to realize that there were other creatives of color experiencing similar experiences—and we left feeling inspired. I asked a friend to create a quick logo for me and named the initiative ‘The Creative Collective.’ I had dreams of keeping it small, like a monthly Bible study but since then, we’ve hosted over 60 events, and have grown into the fastest growing community dedicated to creatives and young professionals of color in New York City. It’s just a testament to what happens when you build something in collaboration with your friends— we’re stronger and braver together.”

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Pastor Sarah Jakes Roberts said in a December 2021 interview,

“I’m still wrapping my mind around it.” Created in 2018, there were only two in-person gatherings before the pandemic hit, forcing the 2020 conference to be a virtual experience. Still形成ing its identity, Jakes Roberts worried if the magic that made the first two conferences so powerful was still there as they offered a hybrid model for the 2021 Woman Evolve Conference, held November 5-6 in Dallas, Texas… Woman Evolve is a movement. The conference, the podcast, the New York Times bestselling book, the plans for a multi-city intentional living community—all move Sarah Jakes Roberts beyond the realm of preacher and pastor to author and businesswoman.  

As for the Support Black Colleges founders, they too saw a great deal of success at the beginning of the pandemic.

“Clothing brand Support Black Colleges aims to amplify the importance of historically Black colleges and universities and strives to encourage people to support and attend HBCUs. Co-founded in 2012 by Howard University students Corey Arvinger and Justin Phillips, the brand has exploded in popularity in the past year (2020) and the apparel line has recently partnered with the NBA to create NBA All-Star merchandise that celebrates HBCUs.  

These three innovators would have never known that their ideas would work if they had developed them in a silo mentality without sharing the work publicly. Ellis stressed the importance of CultureCon being developed in community as a reason why it took off as quickly as it did. Pastor Jakes Roberts turned her ministry into a movement when she saw how much it meant to the women she served. Arvinger & Phillips found a niche between a social cause they cared about and a need that had not yet been properly sourced – apparel that supported not just an individual college, but apparel that supported all 108 historically black colleges and universities. The success of their brand was tied to the universality of it. Instead of making sweaters to promote their school alone, their brand supported all.


Similarly, I would like to suggest that the planting phase of innovation must be done in a way that people can be made aware of the work and a way that allows people to be a part of the work. It’s vulnerable. It can be daunting. It exposes you, but it moves the needle forward. If the pandemic taught us anything, it taught us that we exist in a shared ecosystem. We cannot care for ourselves without also caring for the wellbeing of others. Likewise, when we innovate, we cannot keep our ideas solely for ourselves for fear of them being rejected – we have a moral obligation to share those ideas with the world so that they might benefit those who need them most. To plant something is to give it a chance to live. We owe to the communities we serve to plant innovative ideas as regularly as we can. To hold those ideas for ourselves alone is selfish and limits the ways in which God can bring about the change that so many need.

**PRUNE**

The pruning phase brings with it different expectations. When we plant our duty is to get something new into the metaphorical ground. It is our duty to start it and to see how it does. The pruning phase goes a step further. When one encounters the pruning phase, a few assumptions can be made. We can assume that something has begun. We can assume that work needs to be done. We can assume that assessments can be made. Let us first approach this, horticulturally.

When we look at the process around pruning a flower, tree or shrub, we find that pruning is talked about within the horticulture community as an act of preventative maintenance and is typically cyclical.⁵ The Grounds Guys put it this way: “a regular pruning schedule protects your

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plants, family, and property from injury, pests and damage. It’s an important part of a long-term strategy. Pruning is the practice of removing specific portions of a tree or shrub that are dead and dying due to pests, disease, and lack of sunlight or trimming for healthy plant development and aesthetic purposes.” A few pruning strategies exist that are worthy of our consideration:

- **Thinning** – the procedure removing branches at the base, right alongside the trunk.
- **Topping** – a drastic process that removes most of the branches down to the trunk. Topping is commonly used when training young trees to grow certain ways.
- **Raising** – involves the trimming of low-hanging branches to create headroom for pedestrians, parked cars or entryways.
- **Reduction** – trimming back a tree’s volume, typically for safety reasons, such as creating space for powerlines.

In looking at the difference between pruning trees and pruning roses, something interesting happens. With trees, we cannot apply the same tactic of pruning to every kind branch removal. Some of the ways that we prune these branches have negative side-effects if we aren’t careful. Likewise, when it comes to addressing old ideas that have existed too long without assessment, we can’t just yank them out and start over. We have to handle them with care. Otherwise we run the risk of having negative side-effects that impact the work of the church for years and years to come.

Alternatively, with roses, it is said that the best time to prune roses is in late winter or early spring, when new growth begins. This keeps them from snapping in winter storms or uprooted in strong winds. “Roses have a reputation for being difficult to prune…so pull on a thick pair of gauntlet gloves, grab your favorite pruning shears.” Prune after the last frost… Newly planted roses should only be lightly pruned. Many of our new ideas for innovation are like these roses. It’s best to prune as we grow. Newer ideas can be harder to critique if you wait too longer to offer your

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6 Whitacre, Benjamin, “How to Prune Your Roses to Get the Most Blooms and Healthiest Plants,” Better Homes & Gardens, April 1, 2021 https://www.bhg.com/gardening/flowers/roses/tips-for-pruning-roses/
own assessment. There’s value in pruning along the way. There’s also value in pruning along the way so that when it’s time for that new idea or concept to shine, it exists in its best form possible. Pruning roses in the winter or spring allows them to be ready to go by the time the summer and fall hits. Likewise, pruning new ideas along the way allows them to be ready for the moments of rollout that we may desire to do when we present new ideas to church councils, community boards and others who might benefit from the ideas being shared.

We could learn a lot from the horticultural community as it relates to pruning as a form of preventative maintenance in response to our innovative ideas. This kind of thinking poses questions of us such as: what kind of idea did I produce in the planting stage that I am now evaluating? What am I looking to accomplish with this idea? Is this idea a tree or a rose? In pruning it, do I need to thin it out to simply get rid of the excess noise that has accumulated around the heart of the idea? Do I need to top it down and completely remove some dimensions of the idea that had gotten in the way of it growing in the direction that I intended for it to grow? Do I need to prune in a way that raises the idea / makes space for more people to understand it/be impacted by it? Or do I need to reduce it? Is it a good idea but perhaps it is too much too soon? Does it need to be reimagined in more bite sized pieces? When is the right time to ask these questions? Have I allowed it to produce some degree of growth before I start pruning it? Am I pruning in the right season of this idea? All of these kinds of pruning conversations and questions grow out of how the horticultural community assesses how to prune effectively. These questions are deeply useful as innovators attempt to bring the best out of their ideas.

As a pastor I’m drawn to the concept of pruning through a theological lens. Jesus offers a parable in the Gospel according to John, chapter 15:1-2 where he describes the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and Jesus’s followers. In this parable Jesus lays out the
duties of each and the expectations of each. The passage reads as follows: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

In other words, everything that is working must be pruned for it to continue to work. Pruning is not a punishment; it is a pronouncement of intentionality. When we prune, we declare that something is worthy of our care, attention, and response. I’m reminded of some of the things we discussed in this introduction around innovation responding to what God is up to in the world. Theologically, if God is the master creator, then when we create, we are simply pushing forward the work that God has already begun. In so doing, John 15 shows us the priority that Jesus places on not only being fruitful once, but in tending to that fruitfulness to ensure that it will continue.

The scripture passage subversively implies that were God the Father not to prune the branches, even those branches connected to the true vine would be at stake of losing their fruitfulness. Those branches must be pruned in order to continue bearing fruit. This is critical. Many of us would assume that if Jesus is the true vine, and God the Father is the vine grower, then all we would have to do as branches of that vine is be connected in order to continually produce fruit. But these two simple verses model for us that mere connection to the vine is not enough. Creativity is not enough. Innovation is not enough. It might produce fruit/results the first go round. But true sustainability does not happen apart from pruning, even when we are connected to the vine and vine grower of God the Father and God the Son.

This realization alone should prompt congregations and faith-based institutions to examine our own relationship to pruning. Are we adequately responding to the fruitful potential of our institutions? Have we gone back to revisit how our metaphorical branches are doing and what they are producing? Or have we simply celebrated the current fruit or the current sprout without giving
thought to sustainability? Theologically we are reminded that the continuation of producing good fruit is directly connected to God the Father (the vine grower) pruning our metaphorical branches. Solely being connected to the vine is not enough. The branches must be pruned.

So, what exactly does pruning look like in our context? The pruning phase is the phase where we cast off anything that is hindering the proper kind of health and growth that we are looking to see. I worry that too many of our institutions enthusiastically plant but neglect to prune. Too many see the pruning phase as a bashing phase. I heard the director of our Doctor of Ministry program at Duke, Bishop Will Willimon, say that many pastors struggle with terminating staff that are no longer serving the church well. Bishop Willimon shared with us that those pastors are doing more harm than good to their congregations by not terminating those individuals because the longer they allow them to stay, the further and further away they get from the mission of their church when they allow people to be in positions of influence and power who are not functioning at the capacity that they are capable of.

We think it’s generous or kind not to discontinue things that are not working, but the truth is, we are being harmful in a different kind of way when we don’t take the time to make the necessary tough calls. In other words, we suffer longer and lose more, when we fail to prune.

I want to suggest that pruning appropriately is a form of keeping it beta. It is my assertion that we would all do well to look at innovation through the lens of pruning. Innovation is not just the ability to start something new, but it is also the ability to continually innovate and imagine over the course of the life of an institution or idea. What would happen if we normalized the pruning stage as a necessary dimension of innovation? Much like the horticultural rhythms of pruning, innovation should be revisited with a schedule of regularity. To keep things beta, we need rhythms of assessment and honest response to the question: ‘how are things really going?’
Planting and pruning are necessary, critical and time-consuming steps. But in addition to those steps, true innovation requires us to tend to the work. We must watch carefully how the things we innovate take shape in the world. To tend is different than to prune. Tending is an act of observation, care, deep thinking, deep processing and it asks more questions than statements. When you tend to something, you don’t go into it with your own pre-conceived notions of what is needed but rather, your attentiveness informs you of what is needed.

Attentiveness is a characteristic that we often do not slow down long enough to produce when we are focused on innovation. The tending phase slows us down long enough to have an embodied reaction to how we feel about the thing we have created. Attentiveness helps us to pay attention to how our communities respond to the things we innovate. It grants us a moment to step back and ask the questions, what does my community need in this moment? What am I missing? What are they telling me? Where did we go right? Where could we stand to improve? What do we need more of? What could we do without? To tend is to put ourselves in a state of being where we are ready to hear those answers and to then put into practices the responses necessary.

As a church planter, the tending phase is hard for me. I often feel like there is more to plant and more to prune, but the tending phase is holy. It is every bit as critical as the planting and pruning stage. It is a stage that relies and succeeds mostly in our ability to listen to what our communities are saying. If we were to return to the theological case that we were making in the pruning stage, the tending phase would be the abide phase. John 15: 4-9:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you
abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become disciples.

To tend is to abide. To abide is to be connected – deeply connected. To abide is to spend time. Abiding is not hurried. Abiding is continual. It is steady. In the same way, to tend to an innovative idea is to abide in it for awhile. It is to live with it. To try it on for size. The process of abiding is communal. It is deeply reflective. From that place, we make decisions about our satisfaction with our work. From that place, we dream. As we tend and abide, we often see new possibilities – this returns us to the planting phase. This keeps it beta.

The tending phase is the phase where we are at risk of becoming complacent if we are not careful. This is the phase of our PPT where we can easily assume that because we’ve done the planting and the pruning that the idea is good enough on its own without much additional attentiveness. But it would be a mistake to get too comfortable within this phase of innovation. This is the phase whereas Song of Solomon 2:15 reminds us: it is the “little foxes that ruin the vineyards.”

It’s in the tending phase that one must be attentive to the ways in which people have adjusted to the latest innovative idea. In this stage, one is responsible for not only abiding in community and observing what is happening but to also be mindful of what conditions are helping and what conditions are harming the innovative idea at work. This is the phase where one should be asking – what does this idea need to remain successful? Does it need to be watered? Does it need to be nourished? Are there enough people available to respond to its needs? Is it overcrowded? Are there too many proverbial cooks in the kitchen of this idea?

This is the phase where one discovers – what does this innovative idea require of us? Have we bit off more than we can chew? Do we possess the expertise needed to keep propelling this idea forward? The tending phase is the phase that strategic innovators cannot afford to ignore. It
is the phase where leaders determine whether they need to hire more people for the job. It is the phase where you protect what’s working and give it a fighting chance to continue to flourish.

I liken the tending phase to the role of a team physician on the sidelines of an NFL football game. Dr. Matthew Matava, the former president of the NFL Physicians Society and Professor of Orthopedic Surgery & Sports Medicine at Washington University in St. Louis puts it like this:

“Medical care begins well before kickoff. During pre-game we are evaluating any players that may be questionable for the game…we might take some players out on the field early on to stretch them out, run them and have them go through various maneuvers they would do at position – and then make a decision on whether or not they are ready to play that game.”

According to Bleacher Report, “a policy in the NFL is that the head doctor for each team has to introduce themselves to the head referee, that way, in the event that there is a significant injury, they will know who to turn to on each sideline to describe what they saw.”

This is the work of tending. When it comes to strategic innovation, the tending phase is the phase of functioning like that NFL team physician. Tending encompasses regular attentiveness to the condition of your innovative idea. Tending the innovative idea looks like working it out to ensure it’s still holding up against the new conditions it needs to face. To truly operate in a state of keeping things beta, one must be able to operate like a team physician in this phase, continually alerting your organization of the status of your innovative idea.

According to Dr. Matava, “if a player is tackled and doesn’t get up, Reggie Scott (the athletic trainer) and myself will immediately run out to the player. The first thing is to establish what was injured. If they are not saying anything (due to shock) and they are writhing around, we will try to keep them still so whatever is injured is not disturbed further.”

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The parallels here are uncanny. Sometimes, institutions are so astonished that their big innovative idea didn’t produce the results that they intended, that the tending phase becomes the phase when the metaphorical team physician of your organization has the job of alerting the team that a major setback has occurred. The work of flagging that until the organization is ready to deal with it is just as important as figuring out a new solution. This is the work of keeping it beta.

Dr. Matava notes that NFL team physicians are not only team physicians but also leaders in their fields. “They teach. They do research. They aren’t just clinicians. They are leaders in their respective fields of medicine and their first, second and third priorities are the medical care of the team.”10 Likewise, so it should be with those assigned to the work of tending innovative ideas. This is not the phase to simply assign just anyone to lead. The person tending the innovative idea needs to be someone who understands the goals of your organization. They need to know what they’re looking for. They need to be deeply immersed in the work of the innovative idea.

Too often the ecumenical Black Church rushes this phase of things. Once the big idea is prototyped with the clergy or church leaders it is then given to lay people to implement or to tend to but those lay people are done a disservice because they are often not brought into the planting and pruning stage of the idea. That means when they do the work of tending, they don’t know what they’re looking for. Too often by the time they realize there is a problem, the problem has grown big and gotten away from them.

That’s typically about the moment when people assume that innovation isn’t possible or that the idea is too big, when, the outcome might have been very different if they had paid close

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attention to the tend phase of the PPT methodology. Every congregation needs a metaphorical team of sideline physicians for every big idea—people who understand the goal of the big idea and can assess how the idea is doing in real-time. In our rush to innovate, we cannot skip the tend phase.

This work is different from the pruning phase where things are being cut and trimmed before they grow. This tending work must be done by those who are able to let innovative ideas play out while still watching with an eye for improvement. Like those sideline physicians, those who are tasked with tending social innovation in the ecumenical Black Church must be able to on the one hand, let the church try for the big idea. Go for the touchdown. Block the competition. But that tender must also be attentive to the wellbeing of the institution as it pursues its big idea. Is anyone getting injured? Is anyone pushing themselves too hard? Is there a career-ending injury around the corner because we’re not at our best?

These are the kinds of things that sideline physicians look for at games and in rehearsals. The ecumenical Black Church needs folks on the sidelines for the purposes of tending innovative dreams. Just like NFL players know that if they get injured going after a big play that their physician is right there, Black Church innovators need the space to try out big ideas while knowing that if it doesn’t play out how they wished that there is a team of folks committed to the tend phase of the PPT methodology that are ready to attend to them and get them back on the metaphorical field.
CHAPTER THREE: INNOVATION STRATEGY

“You’re more inclined to be innovative if you believe God is active in the world.” Those are the words of my thesis advisor, Dr. Jones. “We [senior leaders] might love innovation, but most of our employees hate it.”¹ Those are the words of Harvard Business Review writer, Nadya Zhexembayeva.

This is because the work of innovation is disruptive, unpredictable and laborious. But beyond how hard it is to think outside of the box and to stumble upon ideas that work for our communities, it is even harder to implement a strategy around your process of innovation that can be followed by your team. Yet, if you believe that God is active in the world and that your work is in partnership with God, then you must take the big risks to bring new possibilities to life.

If we believe God is active in the world (and for the record, I do) and if we believe in the power of the ecumenical Black Church and its ability to leave lasting change on our society (and for the record, I do) then we are morally obligated to place a strategy around our innovation so that the work that we do is sustainable. This is not just a professional task; it is an incarnational task. I would go so far as to suggest that the incarnation is a true example of a divine template for strategic innovation. When we look at the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we see innovation wherever Jesus’ feet tread, yet we also see strategy.

Jesus strategically selects 12 disciples to walk with him, study under him, and to continue his work. Jesus strategically makes his way through Jerusalem, Judaea and Samaria, proclaiming the good news that He knew had not yet been shared. Jesus disrupts norms and introduces

innovative ways of being, but he also introduces strategy. We see in the gospel of Mark, Jesus’ strategy of the Messianic secret, where He tells those He heals not to share with anyone else. We see Jesus’ Lukan declaration of his own innovation strategy in Luke 4:18 where he announces that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed Him to bring good news to the poor: “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” Jesus strategically shares in Matthew’s gospel the great commission of Matthew 28: 16-20, to ensure the work He began, continues when He is gone. Jesus prepares his disciples and His church to strategically continue the work of innovation. That charge is the same charge that the ecumenical Black Church is following more than 2,000 years later.

Gary Pisano of Harvard Business School has written extensively on the need for an innovation system. As he puts it:

“An organization’s capacity for innovation stems from an innovation system: a coherent set of interdependent processes and structures that dictates how the company searches for novel problems and solutions, synthesizes ideas into a business concept and product designs, and selects which projects get funded. Individual best practices involve trade-offs... without an innovation strategy, different parts of an organization can easily wind up pursuing conflicting priorities”

An innovation system doesn’t have to be daunting for the ecumenical Black Church. It is accessible to us. It’s the system by which innovative ideas can flow through. As Pisano suggests, we can decipher how well an organization will handle innovation by their ability to sustain an innovation system. What is most at stake here is one’s ability to have different individuals and committees naming what the problems are that they want to solve. This system is different from the PPT methodology. PPT is deployed after the decision has been made regarding what problems the church wants to solve. The innovation system strategy must pre-date the PPT methodology in

your institution. The innovation system is what ensures that the church is planting, pruning and tending the right thing. Many churches have been victims of launching projects and solutions that solve problems that no one is asking to be solved. Innovative systems help to keep the church on track – causing the innovative solutions to align with the needs of the people and the communities they serve.

Take for instance, the project of creating the liminal space of the porch that bell hooks mentions in her book, *belonging, a culture of place*. Without an innovation system, one could attempt to create the liminal space of a porch for their local community but if they don’t understand the significance of the porch and what it was meant to convey, their innovation will miss the mark. Every ecumenical Black Church should be in search of an innovation system for their members so that they can execute innovative ideas that are aligned with the big picture goal of who these churches want to be known in the community. Ideas that come into the world as a result of people believing God is active in the world are ideas that need innovation systems. Big ideas need systematic approaches to implementation. This is why we often see large projects in the church broken down into phases. Big ideas often need to be broken into manageable chunks so that people can execute them well without communal burnout.

Strategy is key. As I mentioned in the introduction, all innovation requires strategy but not all strategy is innovative. The goal is to do this strategic work from an innovative perspective. One core way to innovate is to create a climate where all your brightest minds within your organization can thrive and be heard. A thing to note about Pisano’s description of innovation systems is that he indicates that innovation systems gather a coherent set of interdependent processes and structures that dictate the companies’ next step. I find that emphasis on interdependent processes to be critical. For me, that’s the nod to the fact that people within innovation systems will work
together but will come to the process with varying approaches to solving the same problem. Interdependence requires autonomy but it does not make decisions in isolation. This kind of togetherness that allows for autonomous thinking is the sweet spot that allows various approaches to the same problem to be in conversation with each other. It takes strategy to discover the kind of approach that allows your church to implement a strategically innovative idea.

In Shane Snow’s book, *Dream Teams: Working Together Without Falling Apart*, Snow uses a vignette to show the importance of having a strategy to bring several innovative thinkers to the same innovation system. Snow says,

“A managing director who oversaw demographic diversity at one of the world’s largest banks put it well to me one night over dinner. One of the biggest problems we have is we hire all these different kinds of people and then tell them to fit our way of thinking…they have all this potential to add to the culture, and you watch them slowly learn to keep quiet. Businesses that rank high in innovation – the ones that grow quickly and produce game-changing products and services – tend to encourage the airing and clashing of diverse viewpoints. Not just having differences but speaking up. Companies that don’t innovate tend to make people follow a single, approved way of thinking…”

Innovation strategy goes a step beyond getting the right people on your team, but it has a plan for how to bring out the best from each of your team members so that your bigger goal and bigger idea might be accomplished. Just as we mentioned of Jesus – he strategically invited each of the disciples he called to function in their differences. It was all in support of Jesus’ big innovative idea to reach a diverse audience and to share the good news with them. The simple strategy would have been to gather a team of leaders to follow him but the innovative idea was to gather a team of diverse leaders that each expanded his reach in unique and impactful ways. Innovation strategy is key. All of this work can happen while still remaining in beta. Innovation

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systems can be fluid. They can be cyclical. They too can remain in beta. For every new strategically innovative idea, an organizational innovation system should follow.

According to an article by Richard Larrick called, *The Social Context of Decisions*, “The reasons that groups have more potential than individuals can be summarized in two basic principles: error reduction and knowledge aggregation. The error reduction principle captures the fact that, although individuals are prone to error, multiple perspectives yield diverse errors that statistically offset each other (Armstrong 2001).” Larrick goes on to talk about the importance of encouraging task conflict while discouraging relationship conflict. This approach leaves space for the conflict that will presumably come while working in groups to be generative as opposed to counter-productive. Larrick also guards against creating teams that are so homogenous that they are more focused on preserving relationships than making a good decision. This brought to light another benefit of having a very diverse team of leaders working together.

“They found an inverted-U relationship between how accepted a team member felt in the group and his or her willingness to challenge incorrect ideas. Individuals who did not belong to a team (and had no future with the team) were willing to speak their minds and disagree with others. There was nothing to lose. Similarly, individuals who had been on a team for a while and felt accepted also spoke their minds. They had confidence that the relationships could withstand debate, and perhaps even felt an obligation to help the group by speaking up to improve the decision. The subjects most inclined to avoid conflict were the new members. This set of individuals wanted to be accepted but felt they had not yet established a relationship. They did not want to risk their future standing”

Interdependent processes that dictate how institutions search for problems, solutions, and ideas (as Pisano names them), is a helpful framework for churches to decide what kind of innovation is important to them and to what end. Pisano makes a fair point that without a system

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of innovation the decisions around what innovative ideas to support and what ideas to shelve becomes quite challenging and can stall the work if institutions are not careful. This explains why churches can have weeks and weeks of powerful brainstorming meetings where all the leaders name innovative things that they would like to see occur. Yet so often, those ideas live on notepads and blackboards, never seeing the light of day because there is no strategy. Additionally, the ideas don’t see the light of day, usually because the ideas themselves seem unnecessary to the congregants that make the ideas come alive. Without a strategy to implement innovative ideas, it becomes that much harder to convince congregants that the risky innovative idea is even worth exploring.

I would argue that the innovation issue within our churches is not so much a lack of new and brilliant ideas but more so a lack of innovation strategy and systems. Without an innovation strategy, we limit the ability to make a case for why innovation is worth our time. It’s the strategy rollout that can help remind congregants that God is still at work in the world and that the ecumenical black church has a role to play in the work going forth. Innovation strategy is the container to hold church brainstorming sessions in. It answers the why question as people discuss among themselves whether the innovative ideas before them are worth the hassle. Without a mechanism to vet new ideas and to decipher which ideas will be acted upon, many great ideas die in the brainstorming stages of our churches.

Strategy is more than a theme for the year or church bumper stickers, but strategy pauses to look at where the institution currently is and where the institution wishes to go. When one has a clear sense of that, innovation can occur in ways that complement the larger goal of getting the institution closer towards the ends that the leadership has strategically considered.
INTRAPRENEURSHIP

An interesting approach to innovation strategy is institutions and organizations who prioritize the work of intrapreneurship. The term intrapreneurship “refers to a system that allows an employee to act like an entrepreneur within a company or other organization. Intrapreneurs are self-motivated, proactive, and action-oriented people who take the initiative to pursue an innovative product or service. An intrapreneur knows failure does not have a personal cost as it does for an entrepreneur since the organization absorbs losses that arise from failure.”⁶ As I think about Pisano’s approach to innovation strategy and the varying dimensions of the local church, I would suggest that the framework of intrapreneurship is a helpful one to attach alongside the strategy of innovation.

Let’s examine a few entities that have placed intrapreneurship at the center of their work. One thing of note is that companies that prioritize intrapreneurship always give their intrapreneurs a great deal of agency within the organization. There is a significant difference between entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs. This is a helpful distinction because apart from my fellow church planters, most leaders within the ecumenical Black Church are not entrepreneurs – they guide institutions that are centuries old.

What might happen if we thought about church leaders as intrapreneurs? Might it change things if we envisioned church leaders as individuals functioning within the confines of an organization that existed before them, that will exist after them? Intrapreneurs have a healthy sense of awareness that they are working to make change within an organization, yet they know that they

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⁶ “Intrapreneurship”, Investopedia. February 25, 2021
https://www.investopedia.com/terms/i/intrapreneurship.asp#:~:text=The%20term%20intrapreneurship%20refers%20to,an%20innovative%20product%20or%20service.
are limited by the constraints of innovating within an organization that ultimately can veto their ideas. Is it possible that we give our innovative ideas to people who have rank and position in our church but who would not qualify as intrapreneurs? I would argue that innovative ideas need to be stewarded by people who can champion them enthusiastically. Like those NFL sideline physicians, intrapreneurs watch and tend differently than other employees and volunteers within organizations and companies.

Entrepreneur.com names five traits of most intrapreneurs as such: they are passionate self-starters, not strictly money motivated, thirsty for knowledge, able to nurture innovative ideas, and are ready to pivot. These are the characteristics of the kinds of individuals that we want at the helm of our churchwide innovative ideas. These are the kinds of individuals who can motivate congregants who think innovation is a waste of time. These are the characteristics of people who can help get your innovative idea over the finish line, even when it takes longer than your innovation strategy anticipated.

Gifford Pinchot III, coined the term intrapreneur in 1978 and defined it as “dreamers who do.” “Intrapreneurs are employees who do for corporate innovation what an entrepreneur does for his or her start-up” is another definition he uses. Intrapreneurs work independently towards a common goal and with their own responsibilities, ideas, and missions. Now most ecumenical Black Churches do not have the luxury of a large staff full of employees. In fact, most of the dedicated decision makers in the church are volunteers led by perhaps one or two paid

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/331566

8 Daykin, Jordan, Forbes Magazine, January 8, 2019
https://www.forbes.com/sites/jordandaykin/2019/01/08/intrapreneurship/?sh=430bc5c54ea3

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employees/staff members of the church. So, when I read Pinchot’s definition of intrapreneurs, I am envisioning this applying to volunteers and employees at a church. Every church has a handful of volunteers who are so dedicated that people assume they are employees. Within that group of dedicated volunteers are likely one or two intrapreneurs who are ready to run with the vision for innovation and to make it happen. These intrapreneurs still need to adhere to an innovation system and to deploy PPT methodology. Those pieces of the equation are critical for sustainability regardless of the size of your team.

**But Do Innovators Feel Comfortable Innovating With Us?**

As we consider the work of assembling an innovation strategy and pointing out the intrapreneurs among us – both employees and volunteers, the looming question in the back of my mind is: do innovators feel comfortable innovating within the ecumenical black church? Do they see the church as a worthy container for their dreams and ideas? For instance: do people who work in tech innovation, who happen to be our parishioners, feel empowered to help fix the church’s website or create a church app? In other words – when folks who innovate outside of our churches step into outdated models of what could be within our churches, do we create space for them to innovate within? Is there space for our members to be intrapreneurs? Like the conversation Shane Snow had at the dinner table. When we welcome innovators into our congregations do we give them space to use their voices or do they quickly blend into our systems and silence the possibilities that they could share with us because we seem uninterested?

Have we created innovation strategy that allows for members who could be assets to us to be activated in ways that allow them to bring their expertise to the houses of worship that they
love? My hunch is that most of our churches have not. We run the risk of our members getting used to the church lagging behind the innovation of other dimensions of our lives.

When we look at the COVID-19 pandemic and the demands it placed on local churches across the globe, churches created space for intrapreneurs to step in and help pastors and staff alike create new conditions for ministry amidst the demands of the pandemic. That kind of space for innovation allowed members and staff alike to feel a part of the adaptation that took place as congregations around the globe made changes to how they did church. But just as swiftly as those adjustments were made, the door for intrapreneurship and innovation seemed to be tested. While still in the pandemic, organizations found their new normal and quickly settled into their own new normal. As I sit with why that happened, I can’t help but wonder: did we keep the innovation going? Did we keep it beta? I would argue that keeping things beta keeps people from binary answers and that scares people. Folks like to be able to give a yes or no answer and the longer we existed in the pandemic, the hungrier congregations became for getting back to binary solutions that would not change. Congregations were tempted to put policy and protocol in place forgetting that we are still in the midst of living with a virus that we don’t fully understand.

In an August 2021 Washington Post article by my friend and colleague, Dante Stewart, made the case that: The Future of the Black Church Looks More like Dancing in the Streets than Sitting In the Pews. That right there is “exhibit a” of what happened in the pandemic. With the physical doors of the churches across the nation closed on Sundays, people were free to dream about what kind of ecumenical black church served them best and that version of the church scared a lot of people who had come to find comfort and safety in the traditional model of the church.
Stewart puts it like this: “Some people believe that the Spirit only moves and encircles Black bodies in sanctuaries adorned with images of Jesus. But Black faith never was confined to a building. It was always wherever we found our bodies.”

Others who still believe in the necessity of the church experience within the four walls of the church have still had to acknowledge that people have adjusted quite quickly to being predominately virtual. A December 2020 interview with NBC News interviewed several black pastors. One pastor, Bishop Claude Alexander said it like this: “We’re operating under the assumption that all people will not physically return to the church when we get past Covid — many will opt to continue worshipping digitally,” Alexander said. “We have to make sure the experience is what it needs to be for both audiences.”

With both pastors and parishioners acknowledging that the worship experience is changing rapidly it’s a reminder to the church that now is not the time to get rid of intrapreneurs and innovators. On the contrary, this is the time to keep people activated who are willing to place an innovation strategy around the current and future needs of the church. We need as many folks planting, pruning and tending as we can find. This is a moment where voices that have been silent can speak. This is the time period where keeping things beta feels most organic. Bringing Larry Vincent’s words back to the forefront: innovation directs us to what God is already up to in the world, for the common good. In moments like these where change is already afoot, it’s a

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tremendous opportunity for innovators, thinkers, and dreamers to see with new eyes what God is already doing. As Dante Stewart put: God is in the dancing in the streets. God is in younger people helping the elderly. God is at work all around us. Innovators can notice those kinds of trends and to create from that level of inspiration.

This is why we must keep our innovation strategy in the beta stage. We cannot get too comfortable with any one way of doing things. People are adapting and their needs are changing. This isn’t simply an issue that the church faces. Other kinds of companies and organizations have had to face these kinds of conditions as well. I believe the church can learn from other sectors. Let’s look at a quick case study of three companies: Kodak, Google, & Sony.

KODAK: A QUICK CASE STUDY

Let’s first examine a transformative moment for Kodak. Kodak found themselves at the intersection of traditional cameras and digital cameras. An intrapreneur named Steven Sasson was within their midst. This is an excellent case study to showcase what innovation systems look like when an innovator within the organization takes initiative to plant, prune and tend an idea internally but the organization/company is not yet ready to embrace the change/incubate the innovative idea.

“While working at Kodak, electrical engineer, Steven Sasson invented and created the first digital camera. When he presented his idea to the executives at Kodak, they saw Sasson’s invention more of a threat than an evolutionary corner for photography. Even though they allowed him to produce a prototype, he was asked to keep his invention quiet and the camera never saw the light of day. In 2012, Kodak filed for bankruptcy as they were not prepared to compete on the market of digital technology.”

11 Daykin, Jordan, Forbes Magazine, January 8, 2019
https://www.forbes.com/sites/jordandaykin/2019/01/08/intrapreneurship/?sh=430bc5e54ea3
Kodak, regrettably, reminds me of so many churches. Too many churches are guilty of seeing alternate approaches to what they do as threats to what they do. While the ecumenical Black Church imagines itself as creating space for people to think about new possibilities and to imagine new ways of doing things, when the rubber hits the road, they often block the innovative idea from going forth. It’s hard to say why but so many churches shelve innovative ideas. Like Kodak, they make choices that eventually make them irrelevant to the culture. As Dante Stewart points out in his *Washington Post* article, we are at the crossroads of another decisive moment for the church universal. During the pandemic people have redefined how their Sunday mornings will be spent. Out of necessity, Sunday mornings have not included in-person church. Now that the pandemic is moving into a dimension of it where people gather, many are opting not to return to the physical re-entry model. Churches have a choice. Will they silence the innovators and intrapreneurs within who advocate for different approaches to how to be church considering this shift in worshipping habits of the people or will churches silence those voices because they see it as a threat to church as they know it? Time will tell. History will record these years as critical pivot points for our society. What side of history will the church be on?

Too often, instead of imagining new ways of doing things, the church sees new possibilities as threats to the way things currently are. About twenty years ago, so many congregations saw live-streaming as a threat to in-person attendance. About a decade ago, many churches saw digital giving options as threats and impediments to people who didn’t want to learn a new way of giving. Yet the irony was that online giving is a way for people to give much more deeply and for many it’s a way to automate their giving rhythms to ensure that despite where they are across the world, they’re able to give to their congregations. In a world where few people carry cash or checks, churches that haven’t opted into digital giving options are literally losing money.
Live-streaming turned out not to be a threat to congregations that were providing an engaging in-person worship experience. Live streaming actually expanded local ministries to global ministries. The streaming options allowed more people to become aware of the ministries going forth and drew them towards wanting to visit in person even more.

“At every juncture of technological advancement, naysayers have resisted the change only to fall in line with it after it was too late and a new development was on the rise.”

Yet, like the digital camera that Kodak was afraid to create – some innovation does make the former way of doing things obsolete. The key is to be on the right side of the change. As we examined in the earlier chapters – the PPT methodology of planting, pruning, and tending goes a long way in examining whether an innovative idea is sustainable or not. While some innovative ideas will fail, some will not. What might have happened if Kodak tended the digital camera idea? Might they have realized that people preferred it to their former product? Similarly, in this moment, churches are having to consider that their members might prefer virtual church to physical church. What might it look like to tend the innovative church idea? What possibilities are there? If virtual church is here to stay as the dominant way people attend church, what does innovation look like?

GOOGLE: A QUICK CASE STUDY

So how do you create climates of innovation? Google is an excellent case study. “Employees at Google are given a few hours a week to dedicate to innovative projects of their

12 Jones, Nona, From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship (Zondervan Reflective: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2020) p. 15
choosing.” Imagine how transformative that could be for churches. What would it look like for youth pastors to spend 20% of their week dreaming about how they want to impact young people and how the churches they serve can be the vehicle for that change? What would it look like for the business offices of our churches to spend 20% of their time imagining how the church budgets can impact the neighborhoods and the communities that the churches serve?

Google saw the benefit of this approach through their employee, Paul Buchheit. “Google famously encourages their employees to dedicate 20% of their workday to personal projects outside of their compulsory tasks to work on intrapreneurial activities that could better the company in some way.” In that 20% of his workday, over the course of 4 years, Buchheit created what is now known as Gmail. Buchheit once said: “if everything you do works, then you’re not taking many risks and probably not innovating either.”

What I love about this approach is that Google gives them time to work on other things, yet the work must somehow benefit the company. Google gives them time to repeat the first phase of the PPT methodology repeatedly. They are permitted to keep the planting phase beta. We have many brilliant and innovative minds within the ecumenical Black Church but pastors and leaders don’t always ask people to dream about what the church can do. Pastors are good at supporting the youth’s soccer game at the local high school or attending their member’s concert or play but how many times do those leaders ask those same members to imagine creating something similar for


the church itself? What would it look like for the pastor to not only be attending the local soccer
game but for the church to be the sponsor of the soccer team’s uniforms that year? The strategy of
incentivizing innovation that benefits the organization is the sweet spot of innovation strategy and
intrapreneurship. If the future of the church is at least partly outside of its four walls then what
ways can leaders and volunteers dream about innovating outside of the church on behalf of the
church?

SONY: A QUICK CASE STUDY

One final model worthy of our consideration is Sony. I lift Sony as another company to
observe because unlike Kodak, Sony developed an innovative idea that was birthed from an
intrapreneur within the company. That idea ultimately benefitted the company significantly. They
chose to plant, prune & tend an idea that one of their employees brought to them. While Sony did
not set up the conditions for intrapreneurship to flourish as Google does, one of their employees
developed a pathbreaking idea right under their noses.

Electrical engineer and entrepreneur, Ken Kutaragi, “created and launched the PlayStation
for Sony in the ’90s after working for the company for nearly 20 years alongside a stint of
consulting for Nintendo. Sony didn’t originally plan to enter the gaming world but the CEO at the
time, Chairman Ohga, was impressed by Kutaragi’s business idea and invested in his plan.”16

Sony was not intentional about creating a work environment for intrapreneurship as Google
but their chairman was wise enough to recognize a good idea and to invest in it. Sometimes that’s
how it happens. Sometimes the church won’t get it right and we won’t create the proper

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16 Willow, Ruby, “The Intrapreneurship Model. Everything You Need to Know About Being an Intrapreneur.”
Financier.com, August 31, 2021 https://financer.com/blog/the-intrapreneurship-model/
environment for everyone to feel like they can be intrapreneurial but every now and again we still stumble into blessings of brilliant parishioners being in our midst – innovating and creating the next wave of possibilities. When that happens, I hope that pastors and leaders will know to invest in that kind of innovation just as the Sony chairman did. There’s no time to argue over whose idea it was. If an innovative idea is incubated and birthed in your church – that too is a way of leaning into innovation for the ecumenical black church. That too is innovation strategy. That allows us to be a part of where God is going and not just where God has been.

Kutaragi likely would have taken his idea elsewhere if it wasn’t embraced by Sony, but to the mutual benefit of him and Sony, his own company invested in his idea and has been one of the most successful lines of products that Sony has sold over the course of the past 30 years.

I am convinced that we are in one of the most creative moments in our history. Innovation is all around us. With the right strategy and systems, we are on the precipice of a new wave of innovation and possibility.
“Social innovation is about creating ideas for change; social enterprise is about the business model; social entrepreneurship is all about the mindset.”¹ Thus far I have presented models of social innovation that include planting, pruning and tending alongside the concepts of intrapreneurship and innovation strategy and systems, yet it feels important to surface a bias that I have. I believe that the ability to champion innovation is a calling. For clarity, when I use the word calling, I’m defining a calling as a strong urge toward a particular way of life, career or vocation. In the church universal, we often equate callings solely to the divine invitation into preaching, pastoring or teaching. Yet callings go beyond the set apart life of being a clergyperson. People can be divinely called into the fields of medicine, law, education, technology, social work, and so much more. Expanding the kind of work that we can be called to helps to undergird our professional choices as responses to the work of the divine.

This matters because I believe that people who identify as Christians tend to approach things that we feel we are divinely called to with more tenacity and reverence. I want to elevate the discussion of social innovation to that kind of category because I want to see people bringing their best to this kind of work. There is a way that we show up for things that we feel are holy and sacred which is different from how we show up for mundane tasks in our workplace. I believe innovative work deserves the same reverence that we give other tasks before us that we deem to be explicitly theological in nature.

My advisor, Dr. L. Gregory Jones, challenged me to examine the work of commercial entrepreneurship and to decipher if I believe that the work of commercial innovation is also work that one can be divinely called into pursuing. My answer is yes. I do believe the work of commercial entrepreneurship can be work that people are divinely called to, but I would argue that the work of social innovation is the work that more appropriately supports the missional pursuits of the ecumenical Black church. Commercial entrepreneurship is a worthwhile and necessary sector of work that Christians can be called to but when we are talking about the communal work of the church, I am more invested in seeing the ecumenical Black church dive into social innovation.

Social innovators are always ideating. They are always imagining new possibilities, even if they don’t yet know how to make those possibilities come to life. In Nancy Koehn’s book, *Forged in Crisis*, she gives the critical advice that modern leaders should “hire for attitude, train for skill."² Divinely called innovators are leaders who have an attitude of seeing the possibilities most overlook. Even if they don’t yet have the skill sets of the world’s greatest innovators, those who are divinely called to innovate approach it from a different place. They approach from the place of seeing what God sees. Christian innovators do the work that they do because they recognize that they have been divinely invited to co-create with God, our master creator.

Greg Jones puts it like this in his book, *Christian Social Innovation*, “Christian social innovation offers a distinctive vision of social innovation because, at our best, Christians have a very clear sense of purpose: to bear witness to the reign of God that was announced and

embodied in Jesus Christ and is present now through the work of the Holy Spirit who is making all things new. It would be interesting to imagine the products of digital cameras, gmail, and Sony Playstation through the lens of Christian Social Innovation. What might it look like for those created works to have been done by individuals who saw themselves as divinely called innovators? Would their offerings have been any different? How might those products have born witness to the reign of God? Sometimes that week is explicit. Other times it is subversive.

In 2018, NBC premiered a new show called Manifest. For three seasons, audiences followed the Manifest cast as they followed the “callings” that they intuitively knew to respond to. The premise of the show was that a group of people who flew together on an airplane experienced a supernatural event while on board. As a result, when they landed, years had progressed, and their family and friends had assumed that they were deceased. Their return came with not only a shock to the word that they were still alive but each of the passengers from the plane now had a supernatural ability to sense where catastrophe was and to respond to it. They called that intuition a calling. The calling sometimes put them in danger. At times it nearly killed them. Yet the scripture that the show continued to keep in front of viewers was Romans 8:28 – ‘and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.’ The show ultimately put forward the suggestion that the only thing that would keep the passengers alive and protected was their ability to follow the callings.

I am convinced that individuals who take naturally to innovation are not too different from the cast of *Manifest*. Innovators are drawn to catastrophes and feel intuitively compelled to respond. Innovators run towards problems brainstorming possible new approaches to solving the issues before them. Social innovators – be they intrapreneurs or entrepreneurs – are drawn towards issues they see in the world and are compelled to find new approaches to responding to current problems. Like the NBC television series, *Manifest*, I would posit that people drawn to the work of social innovation are called to it. And because of that call, they are more willing to take bigger risks.

**SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS**

A risk-taking sector of note is the sector of social entrepreneurship. I’ve talked a lot about social innovation, intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs thus far, but it would be useful to insert another category of innovators worthy of our consideration: social entrepreneurs. In his classic essay, *The Meaning of Social Entrepreneurship*, Greg Dees gives us a definition of social entrepreneurship as an industry that, “combines the passion of a social mission with an image of business-like discipline, innovation and determination…”

Dees helpfully states in this essay that “entrepreneurs have a mind-set that sees the possibilities rather than the problems created by change…[social entrepreneurs] attack the underlying causes of problems rather than simply treating symptoms. They often reduce needs rather than just meeting them. They seek to create systemic changes and

sustainable improvements.” Social entrepreneurs committed to serving the ecumenical Black Church are those who are looking to plant, prune and tend to big ideas that in their implementation can provide systemic changes and sustainable improvements.

Mark Batterson says in his book, *Chase the Lion* that, “most people believe God is real, but few people actually live like it. The result is a widening gap between their theology and their reality.” Social entrepreneurs are those who live like God is real. They are those who don’t accept the conditions they’ve been given and innovate towards possibilities that point towards the reign of God. They address the social ills before us and right the wrongs that society has produced.

Batterson reminds his readers when thinking about dreaming big that “a God-sized dream will be beyond your ability, beyond your resources. Unless God does it, it can’t be done! And that is precisely how God gets the glory.” This is the kind of divinely called work of Christian innovators that I would like to see come to pass. Where are the God-sized dreams that in case God does them, they won’t get done? Where are the God-sized answers to poverty, homelessness, unemployment, harassment, abuse, education inequities, climate control, racism, sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, incarceration…where are the God sized dream innovators among us? This work is a divine calling. This work is an ode to God’s reign. This work is bigger than us.


Stanford University professor Sarah Soule and her colleagues Neil Malhotra and Bernadette Clavier define social innovation as, “the process of developing and deploying effective solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues in support of social progress. Solutions often require the active collaboration of constituents across government, business, and the non-profit world.”

The areas in need of God sized dreams that I mentioned earlier, need to be engaged from a collaborative lens with an eye towards collective and communal wholeness. I will grant that there are some commercial entrepreneurship projects that might mitigate some of these areas of need yet the ecumenical Black Church is a powerful mobilizing force that has the ingenuity to deal with systemic, social, and environmental issues among us from a discipline of social innovation. We don’t sell products as the church, we meet needs. If the church is a seller of anything, we are sellers of hope.

The University of Southern California’s Sol Price Center for Social Innovation describes the work of social innovation as a form of research. The Price Center indicates that “social innovation uses a flexible, responsive approach built upon an iterative process of concurrent problem identification, design implementation and evaluation of pilot programs and other test strategies with the goal of diffusing new practices into systems change. Co-produce, pilot, scale, diffuse.” The work of social innovation helps to put parameters around the work that will be planted, pruned and tended to. Social innovation work attempts to solve systemic issues. I would offer that the ecumenical Black Church is at her best when she is deploying socially innovative solutions to the issues this world presents. When we saw churches becoming vaccination and

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testing sites at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, that was an example of the church rising to respond to the systemic and communal needs of its people.

A helpful distinction between the work of social innovation and the work of commercial entrepreneurship is that, as Kayla Kurin puts it, “social innovators look for solutions that improve society rather than individuals.” This is not to suggest that in the societal work, individuals are not improved, but it is to say that the work of social innovation isn’t satisfied with only making individual experiences of some better. It’s interested in the pursuit of making our entire society better, which in turn, benefits all individuals.

What a beautiful marriage of innovators who are divinely called and those who have sat with the discipline of social innovation to respond to the present needs of the communities that we serve. Much like the divine call to pastor or preach, this work is also a divine calling. “Innovators practice their art in all spheres of life, and now, a movement has begun. Innovators using their talents to solve social ills, often by disrupting the status quo.”

What might be possible for the ecumenical Black Church if we were willing to look at the social ills that oppress us and realize they can be met not only with prayer and fasting but also with the work of creating innovative responses that can fight against the social ills that our have communities faced for decades and centuries.

Jordan Raynor’s book, Called to Create puts it this way:

“We are made in the image of the First Entrepreneur; thus, when we follow his call to


create businesses, nonprofits, art, music, books, and other products, we are not just doing something good for the world, we are doing something God-like. This is important because it validates the deep desire in our souls to create.”

Wow. You are made in the image of the first entrepreneur. What a concept. This is how we keep things beta. We have a divine model for a master creator who continues to supply new options and opportunities day by day. The business sector has the tools to equip our innovators appropriately. In the same way that pastors receive their divine call but still enroll in seminaries and divinity schools for training, our divinely called innovators have much that they can learn from our colleagues in the business sector. Across the next few chapters, we will explore the work of innovation and ethnography, innovation and Black history, innovation and theology and innovation and behavior management.

CHAPTER FIVE: ETHNOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR INNOVATION

Though divinely called, innovators must be attentive to the times we are in. We are no longer in a time period where we can make assumptions about what people know and what people care about. We must ask questions. We must listen. We must observe. We must chronicle what we hear, see and experience. We must become ethnographers. To prune and tend innovative ideas well, we must have a pulse on those we serve. We must do a bit of ethnographic study.

The ability to listen is critical. There are conversations about how the church has Impacted people that is being discussed among us, if we would only slow down long enough to listen. In the barber shops and hair salons, at comedy shows & radio morning shows, at family reunions and office dinners, people are always talking about their experiences with the church. Sometimes those stories are steeped in satire. Sometimes those stories are steeped in stereotypes. Sometimes the stories are deeply personal and individual. But if we have ears to hear, we will notice – people are speaking. The first duty of ethnographers is listen. When people grant us the gift of hearing what it is they have to say, we must honor that gift by listening. Sometimes the things we hear are uncomfortable. Yet, the data is always useful if we are willing to listen. We cannot innovate well without first listening to our communities.

Rev. Tito Madrazo does a great deal of work in ethnography and he makes the distinction of what it means to be a participant observer of a culture vs being fully immersed in a culture. Rev. Madrazo puts it like this: “there is a form of cultural anthropology that we can embody as participant observers to get a sense of the truest narratives and stories from our communities that
we can share.”¹ Every time we find ourselves overhearing or eavesdropping on what our communities have to say about the church, we are entering space as participant observers. We are both members of our community but also listening as observers of our communities when it comes to hearing the feedback of how our fellow community members think about the ecumenical Black Church.

Innovators must be keepers and tellers of the stories of the organizations they represent. Those who tell good stories have the gift of causing their listeners to want to retell the stories to others – therefore continuing the work and expanding your audience. I’m reminded of a lecture I once heard my doctoral advisor, Dr. L. Gregory Jones, give on the campus of Duke Divinity School in January 2020. The lecture was given on the first day of our communication course. In that lecture he recounted the way Brendan Cox, author of More in Common engaged the Council of Bishops in England. Cox’s indignant statement to the bishops: “you have a story, why aren’t you telling it?” is one that has stuck with me ever since. As Cox illustrated the kinds of stories that people tell, stories of hate, longing for something that never was, stories of cosmopolitan contentment, wishing for things to stay the same and stories of the anxious middle, hoping the bottom doesn’t fall out from under them – Cox illustrates that if people don’t tell their own story as a part of God’s story, their lives will be narrated by others. While each of these groups is telling their story, what story is the church telling?

Like Cox, innovators must know the stories of hate, longing, and contentment of the communities they serve. Stories fuel innovation. They are the experiences of those we serve that

we carry with us rhetorically. If we look at the overall story of the ecumenical Black church, we see that it shares stories of injustice, solidarity, determination, collaboration, resistance and renewal. Despite the specific story of the founding of each of the historically Black denominations as well as the founding stories of Black churches that are not denominationally aligned, there is a commonality of creating spaces of faith formation that were safe for African Americans to worship freely in a way that points towards their own liberation. Every time one innovates on behalf of the ecumenical Black church, they must innovate with these stories in mind. Any innovative idea that threatens the ecumenical Black churches’ ability to worship freely is a counter-productive offering and does not align with the broader institutional narrative.

There’s a battle going on right now for control of the public narrative. We see this battle for control of the narrative everywhere we turn. We see the battle for the control of the narrative in the current fight around the discipline of Critical Race Theory and the literature and history that our children are being taught in schools across the nation. At its core, we are seeing a battle of what stories of our nation’s history will be told to generations to come in our classrooms. What narratives will be told about how the ecumenical Black Church chose to stand up against injustice? What narratives will be told about when the ecumenical Black church risked comfort and stability to stand for what was right. We are always in a battle over our narratives. Ethnographic research brings color to these stories. It puts faces on the issues at hand. It reminds us that we are not innovating simply to respond to ideas and concepts, but we are innovating to meet the needs of the people we serve both in the present and in the future. These stories change and evolve as our conditions change and evolve. That’s why we must keep things beta. This is why innovation systems and strategies are necessary when we chose to move forward socially innovative ideas. These ideas and projects must be up to date with the current battles that our people are fighting.
We must know the current stories. That’s how we choose what causes we need to fight. We’re in a battle. Ethnography helps us to ensure we are fighting on the right side.

Charles Taylor speaks about the concept of the immanent frame and the assumptions we all walk around with in his book, *A Secular Age*. As Greg Jones likes to say, Christians are called to create cracks in the immanent frame of society. We must create cracks in the limited stories offered. The immanent frame as Charles Taylor asserts is the disenchanted acceptance of individuals to believe in a world of order without mystery or supernatural intervention. Innovators who are divinely called are uniquely positioned to crack that frame. The call is to tell different stories. The call is to protect true stories that society tries to cover up. This is the power of social movements such as #MeToo, #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, and more.

These are all movements to place cracks in the immanent frame. These kinds of movements are cracks in the frame because they take our eyes off the evil in the world that we have normalized and cause us to re-think the kind of lives that we should be able to live. These movements return us to theological arguments about the kinds of lives that God intends for everyone to have. The #MeToo movement puts a crack in the immanent frame that suggested that women should be used to harassment and assault because that’s just the way the world works. The #SayHerName movement made cracks in the immanent frame that suggested that only men were being targeted and killed unfairly by law enforcement. It reminded us that we needed to protect our women of color in the same way that we were rallying to protect men of color. The #BlackLivesMatter movement sought to put a crack in the imminent frame from over a century ago. #BlackLivesMatter seeks to undue the lie that African Americans are simply 3/5 of a human being. The movement reminds us that Black lives have value and therefore should not be snuffed out so carelessly by those who have sworn to protect them. Even though these movements are not
explicitly theological movements, they are movements that place cracks in the immanent frame and point us back towards God. Each of these hashtags were strategically innovative tools that organizers deployed to rally large groups of similar and overlapping interests together to crack the frame.

Without cracks in that frame, people have the tendency to move through the world as Taylor would put it: “understand[ing] our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order; or better, a constellation of orders, cosmic, social and moral… these orders are understood as impersonal…. Innovators in the ecumenical Black Church have the opportunity to create the kind of resource for our community that allows those who had come to believe that they had to be completely self-sufficient that divine assistance is available to them.

Through innovation, we tell new stories in the light of God’s story. If we aren’t telling our stories, we leave people to believe that there is no hope. Our stories create cracks in the immanent frames of people’s lives. Isn’t that the legacy of the ecumenical Black Church? Hasn’t it always placed cracks in the immanent frames of lies that tell people of color that they are less than because of the color of their skin? Hasn’t the ecumenical Black Church historically placed cracks in the immanent frame of people’s lives reminding people through the power of testimony services and praise reports that supernatural miracles still occur? Ethnography chronicles these cracks. Ethnography reminds the world that this happened.

Ethnography done well preserves awe. It provides another lens for how we view the mundane. It brings to life things we’ve so often overlooked. Ethnographic studies identify where

moments are happening that people previously assumed were impossible to occur. Those are the stories that must be told. These are the cracks in the immanent frame.

Similar to the power of stories, another ethnographic tool is the power of questions. In this time of social distancing and innovation it is deeply encouraging to remember that we don’t have to have an answer for everything. Some of our most powerful moments of innovation might occur on the backs of a question. Questions compel people to engage. Answers cause people to silence themselves. Innovation alongside intentional questions of our community allows us to decipher what kind of work can be done to respond to the social ills that our communities face.

Like bell hooks who I mentioned earlier in this thesis, Rev. Madrazo also speaks of the beauty of the liminal space. He says, “there is a gift of existing in a liminal space as clergy where we are often not totally in or totally out of our congregations. We aren’t necessarily experiencing life in the same way as our parishioners yet we are close enough to their experience to understand it and to hopefully narrate it well.” It’s in this kind of ethnographic research that we begin to put the data together to ensure that the offering that we plan to give our community is in step with the communal needs and social ills that our community is asking us to fight.

**DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY**

In 2022, much of our ability to diagnose the needs of our community will rely upon our ability to interpret the times, digitally. In a climate where most things are mediated through social media timelines, zoom screens, and iPhone text messages, ethnographic research looks more like scrolling through social media posts than it does sitting in someone’s house having a conversation with them. Yet through the posts, we identify the pulse of our communities’ most urgent needs.
Social media sites like twitter provide insight into the mindsets of the community. They provide opportunities for us to be participant observers within our culture. They give us the opportunity to listen in on how our communities are pushing issues forward.

Digital ethnography is a form of listening that allows us to listen in on the answers to questions such as, how are people processing breaking headlines? What disagreements are occurring over core issues? Where are people standing in solidarity? These are prune and tend questions. We can’t keep our innovation beta in a way that honors the continually evolving needs of our community without doing this work. These are the kinds of questions that fuel our innovation systems and strategies. These are questions many forget to ask. Listening in on twitter threads and following hashtags is a form of cultural immersion that one can do from the comfort of their own home.

Digital ethnography looks like paying attention to when someone who posts often suddenly stops. Digital ethnography pays attention to what questions are being responded to by email or text messages and what questions are being ignored. It might sound mundane, but this is the work. This attentiveness sparks innovation. When the ecumenical Black Church commits to listening to what is being said digitally, it has a much clearer read on what its community needs. In an era where church membership is declining and the doors of the physical church aren’t open like they used to be, due to the pandemic, one cannot afford to overlook the work of digital ethnography.

Social innovators cannot do their work well if they are unclear about how those they serve live their lives. Social innovators cannot innovate well if they don’t understand the needs and the cries of the people.

I had an experience of deep listening at the beginning of the pandemic in the summer of 2020. I, like the rest of the nation, was enraged by the injustices surrounding George Floyd and Breonna Taylor’s killings. That summer was labeled the summer of racial reckoning and the
physical and digital protests were occurring both across the nation and around the world. Many of the digital acts of solidarity were occurring swiftly. It wasn’t uncommon to go to bed one night and things were calm yet awaken the next morning and an entire digital movement or campaign had launched.

One morning, that is exactly what happened. I awakened one day to a sea of black squares on people’s social media platforms with the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter. The explanation for this was that folks were going to blackout their timelines with these black squares to indicate that Black people had been ignored for far too long. I went along with it at first and added a black square to both my personal social media page as well as my church’s social media page. It wasn’t long (perhaps two hours later) that I realized that something had gone horribly wrong. Suddenly on-the-ground Black Lives Matter activists were begging people to delete the black squares that folks had posted.

It turns out that the social media campaign had not come from BLM organizers but rather their detractors. It was an attempt to overrun the social media algorithms with #BLM hashtags which began invisibilizing the #BLM hashtags that on-the-ground organizers needed to see in order to support demonstrators who had been attacked, arrested or more. Almost like a modern-day negro spiritual and underground railroad, folks on-the-ground had been using hashtags to communicate with one another and the social media campaign that had launched had made their work nearly impossible to complete.

I quickly took down my post and made a public apology to organizers for posting without having a clear sense of who had called for the boycott. We all learned a powerful lesson in digital ethnography that day. We learned that when doing the work of digital ethnography, we have to work even harder to vet the sources of information that we observe. We have to put in the extra
hours while listening to digital chatter to ensure we understand the sources, the reputations of the accounts we follow and ultimately the authenticity and credibility of the stories shared online. We all learned to look closer at who is shaping the story. What is happening behind the scenes? Who are we helping? Who are we hindering? Who are we following? Who are the trusted leaders? Who are the verifiers of viral information? How do we work together?

Believe it or not, all that work was done in the span of a few hours online. In collaboration with leaders I trusted, we led the way in having people understand what exactly was at stake when they posted their black square. We gained the trust of on-the-ground organizers that day because we were willing to admit we were wrong. That also taught us who to listen to and who to trust.

This is just one of many stories that illustrate how challenging it is to do the work of digital ethnography in 2022. It’s work that is deeply rewarding when we get it right, but it’s also work that be quite damaging if we get it wrong. The work is often not mediated by individuals we know but by strangers whom we form digital relationships with across the airwaves. Yet with the right care and attentiveness, we begin to learn the ways in which those we follow tweet. We begin to see where the community is that trusts each other and we ultimately become participant observers again who have the opportunity to tune into the conversations that drive the culture of those we serve.

We cannot wait for people to wander into the ecumenical Black Church asking for our feedback, input or assistance. We must go where the people are both physically and digitally. In our ethnographic studies of their needs we can then innovate and respond in ways that actually help our community instead of harming our community. This is the work of social innovation.
Kayla Kurin says that the work of social innovation is “not just a need that needs a response but also an injustice that deserves a response.”

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3 Kurin, Kayla “Social Innovation vs Social Enterprise”, We Thinq, July 9, 2014
CHAPTER SIX: OUR HISTORY

The ethnographic studies of the present are not enough to ensure that our innovative work that we are divinely called to is properly sourced. It’s imperative to also look at our history. Historian, Andrew Billingsley in his book, *There Is a River*, pens the words of Vincent Harding, ‘the whole history of the African American people is like one: infinitely twisting and turning, ebbing and flowing, and more than occasionally flooding.’ But just as the ancient Egyptians did with the Nile, the African American people have learned to respect the overflowing, to step back and then return to the hallowed ground once the flood has receded. They knew that when they did begin to replant and rebuilt, the ground would be even more fertile for them. Always in African American life, and always in our own sociohistorical perspective, there is just one more obstacle to overcome, one more call to the barricades.¹

The global coronavirus pandemic which began in March 2020 has been a proverbial overflowing river for communities everywhere and the river is showing no immediate signs of receding. The church universal has had to learn how to redefine its purpose and value apart from the four walls of its buildings. Clergy have been tasked with simultaneously scaling up their digital presence and engagement with broader audiences while still having to perfect their one-on-one abilities to connect with their congregations and communities in personalized, though socially distant, ways. The pandemic has exposed many of the shortcomings that organizations have been covering up for decades. Yet, the ecumenical Black Church has responded to its own repeated proverbial overflowing rivers across time.

¹ Andrew Billingsley. Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform (Kindle Locations 2591). Kindle Edition.
Sociologist & former Morgan State University college president, Andrew Billingsley names W.E.B. DuBois as “the earliest sociologist to study the black church as a social institution…He [DuBois] pioneered the use of the social survey, and many of his findings and theories are valid a hundred years after his writings.” Billingsley uses the work of scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier, among others, to create what Billingsley calls “a sociohistorical proposition” for what he believes the Black church has been to the black community. DuBois found “the church to be a central feature of black life and to serve as an integrating function.” The Black church had the capacity to hold together the various cultural aspects of the lives of African Americans. “DuBois also observed that the black church, as a social institution, is deeply connected with and affected by the larger society. It [the black church] does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is the center of social life within the Black community,” and is the most characteristic expression of African character.”

W.E.B. DuBois lived from 1868-1963 while E. Franklin Frazier lived from 1894-1962. Both sociologists might have been surprised to see how decentered the church has become in people’s lives in 2022. Even so, I would argue that the Black Church remains a social institution of the black community. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier spent 40 years studying the black church and likewise named the Black church as a social institution because of its “multifaceted religious,

4 Andrew Billingsley. Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform (Kindle Locations 251-252). Kindle Edition.
social, economic, educational, cultural, political institution with a broad range of social structures and social functions.”

Between 1837 – 1870 we see the founding of 28 different historically black colleges and universities, several of which are established by religious denominations such as The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, The National Baptist Convention, The United Church of Christ, The Presbyterian Church, The United Methodist Church and the American Baptist Church.

“There were more than 480,000 free blacks in the Unites States in 1860. Largely concentrated in the Northeast, they also lived in towns and cities in the South and Midwest. They had built churches, established schools, launched business, published newspapers and other literature, and created a network of literary and charitable organizations to accommodate their needs. Thirty years after emancipation the black population estimated at roughly nine to ten million, had more than doubled, and at least 95% of that number resided in the South. Thus, the black churches of the South were an important factor in the lives of the majority of African Americans. By the late 1890s more than half of the blacks were Baptist.”

All of these new possibilities and opportunities were birthed by the black community while they are still getting accustomed to living beyond the trauma of enslavement. The black community was in unprecedented territory, on the back end of a multi-century period of captivity, yet the community still chose to innovate and build. They chose to create a life for themselves on the backside of crisis. “Black churches made an economic investment in the community. They purchased and built churches, parishes, and other facilities. They also established Mutual Aid Societies after emancipation and throughout the 19th century, and these evolved into black-owned insurance companies.”

This is the hope that I see for the current “overflowing river” of the coronavirus impacting our communities. There is a history of resilience that spurs creativity and innovation even within


And Andrew Billingsley. Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform (Kindle Locations 265-267). Kindle Edition.
deep hardship that the ecumenical Black Church has continued to show. As Andrew Billingsley says,

“at the heart of our view is the idea that if we are to understand the sources and resources of the survival, achievements, and regeneration of the African American people and their communities, we would do well to consider the churches. They stand to represent the deep well of spirituality that keeps these people going. They are enormously resourceful potent agents of social reform.”

Black women comprised the bulk of the black church in the 1890s/early 1900s but with their agency being quenched within the church, they began to coalesce in other ways outside of the church to create power within their sisterhood. In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women was formed, in 1908 the first African-American sorority was formed, Alpha Kappa Alpha Inc. followed by Delta Sigma Theta Inc. in 1913. In 1900 a woman named Nannie Helen Burroughs became famous through a speech she delivered at a predominately black Baptist conference, The National Baptist Convention, entitled: ‘How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping.’ In 1909 Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and Girls. In that same year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed.

“By 1910 the women [of the church] had formed an organization called The Women’s Evangelistic Union of America, the name was changed in 1911 to the Women’s National Evangelistic Missionary Conference. By 1915, “Nannie Helen Burroughs proclaimed, The Negro Church means the Negro Woman.” In an ironic turn of events, the very organizations that were supposed to sideline the women began to give them a greater degree of power and agency. These

7 Andrew Billingsley. Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform (Kindle Locations 2598-2600). Kindle Edition.
organizations became the onramp for women to become socially engaged. Many of these organizations still exist today. As Bettye Collier-Thomas puts it,

“The women’s missionary societies and conventions unwittingly laid the groundwork for national black feminine awareness. Social activism was fundamental to black women’s understanding of their Christian mission...Ironically the segregation of females into auxiliaries had an unanticipated effect. Women’s missionary associations and conventions fostered an independence they had previously not known.”

Rev. E.P. Murchison, editor of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Christian Index called the women ‘a church within a church’ because the women had such high numbers. “Differences in governing structures of women’s organizations critically influenced how they functioned. Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian and Episcopal women leaders appear to have maintained a harmonious relation with the male clergy in their denomination. As members of segregated churches within white denominations, these women were often subject to the sexism of their black brothers and the paternalism of their white sisters. While Baptist women launched broad social and political reform programs and often took independent courses of action, AME, AME Zion, and CME women tended to be more restricted in their operations.”

In a strange way, the boxing out of women in leadership in the church created a model of external leadership that is still prevalent in the Black Church and the Black community. Women continue to be the most dominant demographic within the Black church, yet many of our churches are still being led by black Men. As we peruse the tactics that were the most useful in the history of African Americans, the models of distributive leadership were effective to produce more


innovators, one might even call them intrapreneurs, within the large gatherings of congregations and organizations. One key proponent of a distributive leadership kind of model was Ella Baker.

Historian Charles M. Payne captures Baker’s sentiments:

“I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don’t do the work of actually organizing people.”

This stringent critique catapults us into the heart of the tensions that were at stake during the Civil Rights Era. I believe Ella Baker is one of the best examples of holding in tension facing a dire crisis and needing a clear strategy to attack it, while also being a Black woman advocating for Black people but naming that the culture of celebrity will do us more harm than good if we are not careful. This is the tension. If we are to uplift how the ecumenical Black church has functioned as an example of social innovation and if we are to await the proverbial overflowing river of crisis to recede, we must also lift up the conditions that can paralyze our communities from making progress in the face of crisis.

In many ways, Ella Baker in the late 1950s/early 1960s is somewhat of a progenitor for the Womanist theologians who will arise in the 1980s and continue into the present. For Baker, what is at stake is the ability for the people they serve to be able to make decisions for themselves even when their appointed leaders are not present. Similarly as process theologian Monica Coleman

says in her book, *Making a Way out of No Way,* “womanist theologies add the goals of survival, quality of life, and wholeness to black theology’s goals of liberation and justice. Womanist theologians analyze the oppressive aspects of society that prevent black women from having the quality of life and wholeness that God desires for them and for all of creation.”¹² These kinds of leaders are progenitors of social innovation. As the Stanford and USC definitions remind us, these leaders were in the process of, “deploying effective solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues in support of social progress.”¹³

What we are seeing in this moment is not only the global pandemic of coronavirus but we are also seeing the kind of pandemic that is killing black bodies in our streets every day. Unless the Black Church is willing to hear all the voices in the room and to allow some new voices to lead, it will not be able to recover its witness when this overwhelming river recedes. A research study in *The Journal of Human Behavior in Social Environment* released an article that indicated that:

“Many congregations are beginning to move toward the innovation and renewal necessary to maintain the vitality of their congregations...This pandemic has opened the way for innovations including new technologies to preserve worship service and ministries; adaptation of spiritual practices and ministries as well as rekindling of relationships among family, friends, congregations, other institutions, and across cities. As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, some researchers anticipate positive changes in personal religiosity. A Gallup poll found that 19% of Americans interviewed between March 28 to April 1, 2020 reported that “their faith or spirituality has gotten better as a result of the crisis, while three percent say it has gotten worse” Pew Research Center found a similar trend. In particular, Americans attending historically Black churches


and those that self-identify as very religious—those that frequently pray and attend services—are most likely to report that their faith has strengthened.14

True innovation looks at data like this and determines that the ecumenical Black Church cannot afford to mishandle this reset. As people’s faith and spirituality enhances on a personal level and as folks are more attentive to prayer and our worship services, it would behoove the ecumenical Black Church to make progress in amplifying the voices that they have silenced for so long. While the globe is still socially distancing and still innovating and still prototyping new possibilities, it would behoove the ecumenical Black Church to also try out recruiting Black women to lead. As Monica Coleman says of Jacquelyn Grant: “Black feminism grows out of Black women’s tri-dimensional reality of race/sex/ class. It holds that full human liberation cannot be achieved simply by the elimination of any one form of oppression.” This “tri-dimensional reality” becomes Grant’s category of sin.15

This is how important liberation and leadership for the voices of Black women is for the Black church to be able to thrive. It must be able to hold the full liberation of its people by fighting multiple issues at a time. Many are currently fighting COVID alongside economic displacement, alongside housing insecurity, alongside racism, alongside classism, alongside sexism, alongside pre-existing health conditions, alongside anxiety, and the list goes on. If the Black church is to be trustworthy in public conversation and dialogue, it must be ready to go after the liberation of all


people. Nothing less will do in this moment. That is innovation in and of itself. Changing who we advocate for and why is a form of social innovation.

As Ella Baker warned during the Civil Rights movement, now is not the time for the Black church to place on TV a few charismatic leaders. It will not survive this global pandemic in that way. Now is the time to build coalitions just as the black church did in the 1860s post slavery, just as the black church did in the 1950s and 1960s during the Civil Rights Era, just as it did in the 1980s/1990s during the feminist/womanist movement and as it must do now.

Andrew Billingsley argues that

“In times of extreme and sustained crisis, the African American community will turn to the churches and their ministers for comfort, support, leadership, and guidance. These are secular crises, and not all, but many churches, will offer leadership and guidance. Those churches so inclined will respond to the extent that they are strong, independent, and resourceful, and to the extent that they are led by strong, independent, and resourceful ministers.”

In other words, if we take a close look at the history of African Americans and the ecumenical Black Church we will see that we will not get where we are trying to go with only a few leaders at the helm. Even our best and brightest cannot do this work of social innovation alone. We’re in a time period where we need to prioritize distributed leadership. “Distributed leadership is not delegating. Delegation is about getting others to complete your work for you, and this is not a healthy culture to develop with leaders in your school...There are three key principles to distributed leadership – autonomy, capacity and accountability. Each are of equal importance and all are inter-dependent.”

16 Andrew Billingsley. Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform (Kindle Locations 2602-2605). Kindle Edition.

17 Scolly, Ben Distributed Leadership Explained (January 24, 2018) SecEd https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/distributed-leadership-explained/
working within imperfect communities. Too many leaders of new organizations hoard the
decision-making authority because they have convinced themselves that the people around them
cannot do the job. A distributed leadership model takes the spotlight away from an individual or
two and spreads it out across a cohort of people.

For many, distributed leadership models represent a drop in status. Such a drop in status
can cause many leaders to feel as though they are failing or fear that someone they share their load
with might outshine them. Distributed leadership models might lessen the spotlight and the status
of one charismatic leader but they give you more coverage. A distributed leadership model not
only empowers the people you work with and strengthens the community but it brings about
message clarity around the work that you and your organization are doing. Such leadership models
equip new institutions to respond to counter organizations or systems that might be looking to
silence or hinder the work of one’s organization. If churches adapt a distributive leadership model
it will help them better support innovation because more individuals will be equipped to respond
to the new work of innovation.

Our history shows us that the ecumenical Black Church has the ability to gain the trust of
our community but it won’t happen if we repeat the mistakes of only presenting a handful of
charismatic male leaders. Innovation isn’t innovative if it’s done on the foundation of an outdated,
patriarchal model. Innovation also cannot rest on the decisions of one or two leaders. The entire
church must buy into innovation for it to work.
I should submit that while I’ve talked about innovation as a calling and I’ve put forth scenarios where intrapreneurs and innovators have led with bold ideas and approaches to solving the issues that they face in their own organizations, the work of innovation can be tough for people of faith who believe that God will do all the hard work on their behalf without their input. Make no mistake. Innovation takes work. Innovation requires sweat equity. Innovation will challenge your theology about how God moves and How God shows up.

While we believe that God will make a way out of no way it’s useful to remember that often God will require people to help identify that way. There are some who would argue that the work of innovation is not necessary in the church. Some might even find it offensive to the work of God because some believe that communities should simply wait for God to alter the scenarios they find themselves in without their involvement. In other words, some might find the work of innovation as synonymous with manipulation. They might see the work of innovation as a way of forcing God’s hand before God decides to move. These kinds of questions are like the kinds of questions that theologian Kathryn Tanner lifts in her work on creation. She poses the question in her article, “Is God in Charge,” who is in charge, God or God’s creation?¹

Tanner puts it like this. A God that is transcendent and beyond kinds, creates in God’s likeness, yet God’s creations don’t limit the idea of what God is capable of being, at any given time. This should be liberating for the Christian. As Tanner explains, “One should not say that God’s intention to create the world is part of God’s very nature; God may always intend to create

the world, but this is by no necessity of nature.” 2 What does it mean to imagine a God who is constantly creating? A God who is not static. A God whose likeness is not known to God’s creatures, because that likeness is different from anything God’s creatures have ever seen. A God like that changes one’s idea of providence. It frees us to be innovators.

As innovators, we are free to make choices. As innovators within the church, we are persuaded to make choices that are theologically informed. “The theo-logic of responding to change becomes more apparent when we realize that choice is shaped not only by circumstance and the available options, but also by purpose.”3 Larry Vincent suggests that it is only those who view God as a ‘disinterested observer’4 of the lives of human beings who don’t understand the theologically rooted need to innovate within our churches. “Any response to change aimed at creating new value requires us to make choices within a context. Theology aims to understand God’s purposes in a context. Where innovating needs theology is in the search to understand the intrinsic value within that context.”5 So how do theologically informed innovators create?

Mark Batterson says we go after dreams so big that they are “destined to fail without divine intervention.”6 Batterson frames the work of innovation and dreaming theologically. He


intentionally uses the word repent when he reminds innovators to ask God’s forgiveness for thinking too small. “What impossibility do you need to repent of? It’s not just our sin that we need to repent of. It’s our small dreams. The size of your dream may be the most accurate measure of the size of your God.” Wow. What a concept.

These dreams aren’t only for the dreamers – they’re the mechanism by which God’s kingdom on earth can more closely mirror God’s kingdom in Heaven. If we believe, theologically, that God envisions a different way of living that is abundant and audacious then innovation is birthed out of the theological assurance that we are co-creators with God. If God desires another way of being to exist on this earth, we must ensure it comes to pass. We must innovate.

These are the kinds of dreams that are fueled by prophetic imagination. Prophetic imagination suggests that because of who we believe God to be theologically, we can imagine new possibilities that we prophetically declare will come to pass after a while. Prophetic imagination goes a step beyond dreaming. It is a public declaration of something that will be. It’s the pronouncement of the God-sized dream with the assurance that it will happen. The ecumenical Black church must always be willing to communicate with assurance the new things God will do in the earth.

Greg Jones indicates the importance in dealing with the end⁸ in mind. Dr. Jones calls us to remember the way the earth will look under God’s reign is a motivating factor to keep us innovating from a place of prophetic imagination as opposed to innovating solely from the lens of

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survival. Jones advocates for “Christian social innovation shaped by the end.” What is God already up to? What has God shown you? What vivid dreams have you seen? This is prophetic imagination. This is innovating from a place of theological assurance that God is up to something.

Duke University Fuqua School of Business Professor Chris Moorman co-wrote a book called, *Strategy from the Outside In*. She opens this book describing the value of the outside-in strategy that many successful companies have been using over the past ten years. This approach takes it cue from the behavioral patterns of their consumer base and innovates from there as opposed to assuming what their audiences may want and innovating from that place. In a vignette with Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, Bezos put it like this: “Rather than ask what we are good at and what else can we do with that skill, you ask, who are our customers? What do they need? And then you say we’re going to give that to them regardless of whether we have the skills to do so, and we will learn these skills no matter how long it takes... is the world changes out from under you if you are not constantly adding to your skill set.”

“Because firms (and business units, departments, and teams) are made up of human beings, they are inevitably tempted to put their own survival first. This instinct naturally accords with an inside-out view, since the outside-in view often requires a firm to reinvent itself—to employ creative destruction internally to meet ever-changing customer value expectations.”

“Just as an outside-in perspective doesn’t guarantee success without market insight, market insight and an outside-in strategy do not guarantee success without a series of intentional actions…”

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Four customer value imperatives shape this work. The first is “to be a customer value leader with a distinct and compelling customer value proposition. Second customer value imperative: innovate new value for customers. Customer value and innovation benefit the firm when they are transformed into valuable customer and brand assets. The third imperative is to capitalize on the customer as an asset. The fourth imperative capitalize on the brand as an asset.”

I should take a moment to assert here that words like customer, capitalize, and asset are not the right words to use when discussing a church and those it ministers to. These words do not have a direct equivalence because those the church serves are not customers or consumers, but human beings created by God that we are honored to serve. The idea of capitalizing in one area or deeming some areas as assets is incongruous with how we value those we serve and how we make decisions about the ways in which we will go about serving them.

With that in mind, however, I do want to submit that some of the value proposition approaches to deciphering what those you serve need could prove useful when imagining how to innovate effectively within the church. The church is often rightly criticized for having an inside-out mentality where we only offer what we deem necessary for those we serve but what happens when we offer things that our communities do not need? I would submit that some of the tools and skill sets from our business sector colleagues could assist the efforts of the ecumenical Black Church to serve its communities innovatively from a place of understanding what they need and providing that instead of deeming what our communities need and being dreadfully wrong.

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“Ultimately, customer value is about the trade-off between the benefits that customers perceive they are getting from an offering and the perceived cost of obtaining these benefits—"^5

Make no mistake, there is a cost associated with opting into our church communities whether we recognize it or not. I am not only talking about the cost of expending resources for tithes, offering or other philanthropic gifts to the church but there are costs that people rack up when they choose to get involved with the church. There is the cost of people’s time, gifts, talents, relationships. Leisure and more. Every time someone opts into your church, they are weighing the perceived benefit and the perceived cost of getting involved in what your congregation has to offer. People are asking themselves, is this worth my time? Is this worth my resources? Does what I receive from this place meet or exceed what I give?

Moorman & Day created a formula for customer value. As they put it, “customer value = (1 – perceived risk) X (perceived benefits – perceived life-cycle costs).^6 To put it in the language of the church. Every time someone weight the cost/benefit analysis of stepping foot into your church, they are really trying to decipher: what value will I gain from this experience? To use the Moorman/Day formula they are weighing the perceived risks they might encounter being associated with your church by the perceived benefits of being connected to your church. But it doesn’t end there, the Moorman/Day formula suggest that after they’ve done that cost/benefit analysis they are then subtracting that from the perceived life-cycle costs. What will this cost me or add to my experience for the rest of my life?


Here is where a church’s ability to show their capacity to innovate is crucial. I would argue that for most churches, the initial cost/benefit analysis of potential members is one where churches likely come out on top. But I would argue that it’s in the question of the life-cycle cost/benefit analysis that most churches won’t pass. And this is because of most churches’ inability to show a way forward with innovative systems at work. Most churches would have difficulty convincing a potential member that throughout the lifespan of their commitment to this church that innovation will be taking place. And whether people voice that or not, everyone wants to be connected to something that does not remain stagnant over a life cycle but rather has innovative proclivities to adjust with the times and to continue to serve its present day and age.

Ted Levitt, the author of the classic Harvard Business Review article “Marketing Myopia,” famously observed, “People don’t want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole!” Perceived benefits are the outcomes that customers associate with a product, service or relationship with a company.”7 This idea that people don’t want the drill, they want the hole is powerful. It’s true! If someone were to show them a different tool that could create the hole in their home more effectively, they would switch the tool because what they really want is the hole. And in 2022, the ecumenical Black Church must recognize that people want the hole and are less concerned about the drill.

Folks want to be ministered to spiritually. Folks want to be connected to a community of people that allows them to sow in and giveback. People are looking for spaces of formation for their children and a place that facilitates the inflection points of their personal lives (i.e., weddings,

christenings, baptisms and funerals). But here is the tricky thing. In 2022, people can get most of these services fulfilled through their local civic and social organizations. They can get spiritual inspiration from their favorite YouTube preacher who they’ve never met. They can find comradery in their children’s soccer leagues, in the alumni organizations of their college and grad schools, their fraternities and sororities, and more. People are finding different ways to get the hole in their house, without the drill of the local church. If the church doesn’t innovate, we’ll be a series of left behind drills on the shelves of the hardware store while folks find easier ways to get the holes, they need without every encountering us.

“Buyer choices are also swayed by differences in perceived risks among vendors. The degree of risk depends on the buyer’s uncertainty about the answers to the questions, “Can I trust the supplier’s promises? Will the offering perform as expected? Will the vendor stay in business long enough to support the product in the future?” Here’s where church leadership comes in. This “can I trust them?” question is critical. A part of what intentional work of innovation can do is to find ways to answer these kinds of questions before people even ask them. We see this on display now through many churches’ video campaigns. You might stumble across a one-minute Instagram or TikTok story by a pastor where they are in their study preparing or in the sanctuary giving a snippet of a sermon. The idea here is to show the audience that the leadership is trustworthy. These kinds of videos show that the leadership is taking the act of preparation seriously, etc. The risk among vendors translates to the risk among pastors. People ask themselves, am I safe with this

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pastor? How do I compare this pastor to another pastor? How risky is it to get involved here? Is this church going to last? These are critical questions. Innovators would do well to remember that these questions are in the minds of the communities we serve.

In a 2021 National Public Radio (NPR) interview with Sally Herships, my doctoral thesis co-advisor, Dr. Keisha Cutright, shared her research about how different brands should relate to one another. “We found that when brands are actually nice to other brands and publicly praise another brand, consumers get excited about that and actually reward the praising brand... what we’re finding is that when people see you praising another brand, they automatically think you’re now this warmer, fuzzier brand that they can trust. Because you would put yourself on the line for another brand, you must be a brand that they can trust.”9

Again, I resist the language of brands for churches, that is not a direct equivalency. Yet, as a trained brand strategist I will offer that each church has a distinctive brand impression in the minds of our communities whether we like it or not. The idea that Dr. Cutright is advancing for consumer brands is a concept that I believe can be applied to the ecumenical Black Church. And if we are working with her theory around consumer brands here, then the same can be said for churches and pastors. If the community hears clergy and leaders being kind to the other pastors and clergy in their neighborhoods, it only strengthens the trust that their own parishioners have with them.

Dr. Cutright is a professor at Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business. Her work focuses on the behavior of consumers. How and why do people make the choices they make? For

instance, in research with consumers want to lose weight she asks the questions: “In particular, we want to know: Do you want the product that tells you, “Hey, we’ll do it all for you. We’ll make this very easy for you?” Or do you want the product that says, “We’ll help you down this path, but you have to work really hard, as well.” Which do you want, the hero, or the helper?”

“We find when people feel low control over different aspects of their lives, they actually want the brand that is more of the helper, not the hero. They want the brand that says, “You have to work hard, and we’ll be here to help you, but we’re not going to do all of the hard work for you.” They would rather Nike come in and say, “You put on our shoes, and if you work really hard, we’ll help you toward this goal of losing weight or getting fit.” I would argue that this is an excellent way to think about innovation. Our communities are not looking for us to remove their agency. But they are looking for partners in their life journeys. They want the church to come alongside them to help them do “life together” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say, but they don’t need the church to strip them of their own agency and decision-making power. Innovation doesn’t silence those it serves. It gives folks an entry point into another way of doing things, but it does not ignore the people.

“They don’t want Nike to come in and say, put on our shoes and they will do all of the work for you. People want to feel as if they must put in the work, because this gives them a sense of empowerment, it makes them feel as if eventually, they can control outcomes in their lives again. And so, that’s what we’ve studied over the course of several studies and have found this same effect very reliably.” For people who always have a very high sense of control, we find that they don’t really care how you talk to them about their products. We didn’t see much of a difference in their reactions as to whether or not the product was empowering for them or not.”


So, innovation must be created with the behavioral patterns of the communities we serve in mind. True innovators understand the ways in which those they are creating for make decisions, take risks, and find fulfilment through the new experiences they explore. Because the ecumenical Black Church has always been the kind of institution that exists in relationship to its community, this study of consumer behavioral patterns is an asset for the Black Church community. This is the kind of research that allows us to identify intrapreneurs within our churches. This is the kind of data that exists alongside our “plant, prune, tend” methodology. We must be clear on how our communities make decisions. We must be clear on what they need. We must be ready to deploy an outside-in approach which doesn’t limit our services to the in-house capacity we have but rather, determines what the community needs and innovates from that place of need.

Even with this kind of analysis, the ecumenical Black Church must be clear that it must fight for its place within our communities. The history of our church keeps us as contenders, but our communities are looking for us to prove our current worth and value to them. In a study done in South Africa by the Dutch Reformed (DR) church on social innovation and religious organizations, they remarked that “it is a possibility that mainstream churches are losing their effectiveness as social agents. The total number of members has been steadily diminishing over the past decade, resulting in fewer resources being available to improve the social circumstances.”

They conducted this study to decipher how they might be able to meet the current and future social needs of the communities they serve.

“The DR Church conducts a survey every 5 years, called The Church Mirror, to identify certain trends in the organisation. Mouton specifies that The Church Mirror includes a section on innovation. It also interprets various statistics. The number of members of the DR Church who believe that the denomination is innovative has risen from 25% in 2010 to 31.3% in 2014. The purpose of this study was to investigate and analyse the social innovation capacity of the DR Church as a social entrepreneurial agent in its environment.”¹³ They use Greg Dees’ definition of social entrepreneurship as a way of dealing with complex social needs in an innovative manner. Dees states that “a social entrepreneur always searches for new ways to take hold of an opportunity to serve as change agents in society and the economy. However, social change is often confronted with resistance.”¹⁴

Here is where the rubber hits the road. Churches across the globe are wrestling with the duality of dwindling membership but still having the ability to reach the communities they serve. As people shift their church attendance rhythms the need for innovation is even higher. I would argue that people still desire to have a church and clergyperson in their lives yet the way they access that is changing by the day. Therefore we need social innovators to begin to assess this moment and to begin imagining new ways to conceive the church. “The purpose of any church is to transform its community within moral, social and spiritual frameworks. While the social benefits to the community can be organized, the moral and spiritual changes in a society can be assessed


using only non-monetary methods.”

When thinking about innovation and behavior, Greg Jones offers a helpful reminder of what innovation looks like down through the years.

“Every individual, organization or society must mature, but much depends on how this maturing takes place. A society whose maturing consists of simply acquiring more firmly established ways of doing things is headed for the graveyard—even if it learns to do things with greater and greater skill. In the ever-renewing society what matures is a system or framework within which continuous innovation, renewal and rebirth can occur.”

According to political scientist, Benoit Godin the phrase ‘social innovation’ is at least two hundred years old…” Successful entrepreneurs have a combination of innovation, sustainability, reach and social impact, according to the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. You don’t have to be an entrepreneur to be an innovator, but all entrepreneurship includes some degree of innovation. I take courage in how old the field of social innovation is. It feels paradoxical that a field so focused on the future has a two-hundred year past. Yet that is also an encouraging statistic because it’s a reminder that the work of innovation is ongoing.

Not only is the work of innovation ongoing, but it’s also communal. Professors Bruce Rawlings & Cristine Legare in their article, “The Social Side of Innovation,” argue that “innovation is inherently social, and that innovation is frequently the product of modifying others’

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18 “What is a Social Entrepreneur?” http://www.schwabfound.org/content/what-social-entrepreneur
outputs, and successful innovations are acquired by others.”¹⁹ I love this point because the ecumenical Black Church is also inherently communal. I am personally of the mind that we never create alone because we never experience inspiration in complete isolation. In the same way that we cannot read without interpreting, we cannot dream without first being inspired by something we observed within community.

“These, innovations are inherently social and should be examined as such (Turner & Flynn 2016). To fully understand human cumulative culture, there is a need to examine, in unison, and socially mediated innovations, and their subsequent social diffusion…Innovation has traditionally been represented as independent invention, and research has targeted determining characteristics of so-called innovators and the contexts which promote successful innovation. Yet, in contrast to claims that innovation is an asocial endeavor, we argue that innovation is inherently social.”²⁰

As we interrogate the idea that innovation cannot happen in isolation, I also would submit that declining membership in our churches does not mean that people are living in isolation. We are always communal. Even the act of staying home and watching a YouTube sermon or reading your bible is communal. The Bible was translated and packaged in community. To access a digital sermon or podcast, one must scroll across other communal offerings to land on the offering they’re seeking. None of what we do is in isolation.

“Declining membership of formal religious institutions need not imply a decline in human religiosity; nor does declining religious participation necessarily imply an attenuated cultural influence for religion on wider society. Secularization may operate at the level of


societal influence exerted by religious institutions, but this is not necessarily consistent with declining levels of personal religious commitment.\textsuperscript{21}

People might be changing their rhythms of church attendance, but I believe that people are still committed to their personal religious practices. My doctoral thesis co-reader, Dr. Keisha Cutright pushed me on this point asking me if I believe that people are committed to religious practices or if people are committed to their personal faith in God? The question pushed me to sit with what I am seeing take place in my experience. I would suggest that people are more committed to their personal relationships with God than they are committed to the changing rhythms of religious practices but I do still believe that people are committed to many of the core religious commitments that have traditionally been associated with the act of going to church: listening to sermons, singing hymns and songs, getting involved in outreach efforts and social justice work. In that vein, I would argue that people are committed to their personal relationships with God and value having communities to be a part of that share those same values. That act of communal belonging, however, may or may not translate to people wanting to physically attend worship experiences. That places the duty on the church to keep looking for ways to be the church, even if that takes on a more dominant identity outside of the 2-hour worship experience on sacred days of worship.

\textsuperscript{21} Henley, Andrew \textit{International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship} 2017, Vol. 35(5) 599
CONCLUSION

The ecumenical Black church is a force in the African American community and has important significance for all people. It is not perfect. It has had its share of rightful critiques. But it is still one of the most reliable institutions left in Black communities that has the capacity to advocate on behalf of Black Americans and to house a liminal space of safety and connection that spans class, gender, and geographic location. It’s time for the ecumenical Black Church to join the next round of social innovation within the Black community. The global pandemic provided a re-start that required the church to stop and assess what was working and what was not. People proved that they have not given up on their personal relationships with God. God is not the problem. Institutions are. However, the pandemic also showed us that if institutions like the ecumenical Black Church can be repurposed to meet the tangible needs of the people, then those institutions will flourish.

This work, however, must remain in beta. We cannot innovate on the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic and then wait another 50-100 years to innovate. This work of social innovation must be ongoing. It must be in a PPT cycle of plant, prune and tend. The innovation that comes forth from the ecumenical Black church will need to consider the ethnographic research that both digital and physical time spent within our communities yields. This kind of social innovation work is going to require attentiveness to behavioral management trends within our community. It’s going to require outside-in approaches to how we staff and serve our churches. We must create in response to the actual needs of the people vs. creating based on our strengths and hoping that those strengths align with those we serve. We have to risk being vulnerable. We must create in community. We must amplify the voices of the marginalized among us who are already speaking. We must be comfortable with failing. As Shane Snow put it, “we believed that
ideas could be pushed forward in a more productive and innovative way if you have a team of people with diverse backgrounds. And not just culturally diverse, but also by discipline.”

For the ecumenical Black Church to go to the next phase of its impact, we must be sure that we have more than clergy and church leaders around our proverbial table. We need volunteers and members across various industries. To meet the needs of a diverse community, you need diverse voices at the decision-making table. Even though most of our churches are predominately African American, that does not let us off the hook with diversity. One can have an all-Black team which is extremely diverse if you consider where people grew up, where they went to school, what professional field they are in, marital status, do they have children, are they an entrepreneur, how old are they? Etc. There is no excuse for not having this kind of diversity on your team. With this kind of team, the innovation systems and innovation strategies that the ecumenical Black Church is capable of, expands tremendously.

That kind of atmosphere might spark more tension and it may take longer to hone in on the innovative ideas that they church pursues, but that kind of internal tension ultimately makes the communal impact more authentic and it likely adds to the longevity of the work. Shane Snow speaks about it as rubber-band physics. He says that,

“a regular rubber band lying on a table has very little potential energy. If you leave it alone, it’s not going to do anything. But when you pull the rubber band from two directions and stretch it, suddenly it has a lot of potential energy. If you let go of it, it will go flying. And the more you stretch the rubber band – the more tension you put on it the more potential energy the rubber band has. The farther you can shoot it.”

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2 Snow, Shane *Dream Teams* New York: Penguin/Portfolio, 2018 p. 70
The innovative work of the ecumenical Black Church cannot rest in a false comfort zone. That approach will not meet the needs of the people. The ecumenical Black Church needs to be stretched and needs to shoot as far as it possibly can. Tension is good for the church because it allows the church to work through internally much of what those who it serves will ask of them publicly. Make no mistake, the ecumenical Black Church has always had internal tension.

According to Princeton Theological Seminary professor, Dr. Keri Day, in 1966 while Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was advancing the Poor People’s Campaign, only 13% of black churches supported him. Revisionist history would have us to believe that every church was in support of the radical and dangerous tactics of Dr. King and his colleagues in the movement for non-violence but that is not the case. Churches in 2022 should take courage in knowing that it’s never been the case that everyone agrees on the same tactic and approach at the church. But if your strategic innovation teams are diverse enough to hold varying perspectives it allows space for the ideas to breath and to be presented in the best version they can be before they reach the public. And still its important to remain in beta because these very ideas can still face opposition when they reach the communities that the ecumenical Black church serves.

But bigger than having a diverse team, the most important dimension to all of this is that we must dream and execute God-sized dreams. The communities we serve expect us to have some prophetic imagination. People come to church in times of crisis because they need to know what the church sees because they believe that we see with the eyes of Christ, even in times of hardship. The social innovation that we dream up must align with the vision that God has for God’s people. Our work must be big enough, bold enough, to point towards God’s glory.

In a time where racial unrest is still at work and inequalities persist the ecumenical Black Church must dream again. It must innovate again. It must be able to activate the intrapreneurs and
entrepreneurs around us. It must be willing to approach unforeseen circumstances with big questions and a willingness to ideate and prototype until we land on something worth trying. It must be willing to tell true stories and crack the immanent frame of despair and disbelief. The ecumenical Black Church must be a disruptor. It must disrupt the lies told by oppressors who still don’t want to see us on our metaphorical liminal spaces of porches and respite. It must disrupt the narrative that God has given up on us. In place of those lies, social innovation through the ecumenical Black Church has the ability to create and display a counter-vision for what the church still can be for the Black community.

I believe the ecumenical Black church can still be an institution that helps the plight of African Americans politically, socio-economically, spiritually and socially. I believe it can be an anchor institution that the Black community can rely on in times of joy and sorrow. I believe it can still be an equipping station for skill sets the people need and I believe that it can still be a liminal space of support, belonging and safety. The ecumenical Black Church in many ways has to win back the trust of our community but I still believe it is possible to do so.

The coronavirus pandemic has illustrated people’s ability to work together in solidarity towards a common goal. Things have not been perfect, but communities have rallied together and helped one another get what they need for their own wellness. I believe the future of the ecumenical Black Church lies not in how well we preach, how sweet we sing, how fancy our buildings are or how stylish our fashion is. I believe the future of the Black Church will rest in our ability to be trusted partners in our communities and trusted spaces of innovation and incubation for ideas that meet the societal communal needs that we all face. The future of the ecumenical Black Church is directly connected to our ability and willingness to meet the communal needs of our people through social innovation.
In our pursuit of meeting these communal needs, we will need to be willing to embrace the concept of “optimal distinctiveness: a sense that we’re the same and different at the same time. The easiest way to get there is to create unique groups which give us the simultaneous feelings of belongingness and uniqueness”\(^3\) The ecumenical gives us the sense of belonging that roots back to times of enslavement in America. That belonging helps us to feel safe and communal. Yet it’s going to be our ability to embrace our uniqueness that will take the ecumenical Black Church to the next level. It’s time to tap our innovators, our thinkers who dream outside of the box, our community partners, our tech gurus, our businesspeople and so much more. Our uniqueness will be our greatest strength and yet we cannot allow ourselves to get so attached to the new ideas that we allow them to paralyze us. We need a creative climate that normalizes keeping things beta. People need to know that if they make an innovative suggestion at church that they aren’t stuck with that idea for the next thirty years. People need space to dream and to plant strategically innovative ideas in an ongoing way. Our optimal distinctiveness is what will allow the ecumenical Black Church to get into the community offering a place of belonging without requiring people to trade in their uniqueness. On the contrary. The ecumenical Black Church needs to gather as many unique perspectives as possible to help it innovate well.

To be clear – I believe that uniqueness is found within our current community. There are people who joined church long ago who no longer attend but still feel a sense of belonging with their local home church. This next phase of innovation for the ecumenical Black Church must be connected to engaging those unique voices who have left our churches but still feel like they

belong. Now more than ever, African Americans need liminal spaces. I return to a point I made earlier in this thesis – the work of innovation is a calling. It’s too important to ask someone else to tend the big ideas that others have dreamed up without training them. There will always be people among us who view problems with solutions. There will always be people who have a heart for their community and not just a heart for themselves as an individual. Those are the people that need to be tending to the innovative ideas that we prototype. Those are the ones who should be the NFL sideline physicians that track how well we are doing with implementing the vision. Innovation is long-term work. It has many ebbs and flows, stops and starts. Churches have to be comfortable with keeping it beta. Some innovative ideas will find their audiences immediately. Others will take years to find their stride. Some ideas will be before their time and will have difficulty finding support. But the work of innovation must go forth. It is the only way that the ecumenical Black Church has a chance of surviving.

Now is the time to empower our most brilliant minds. Now is the time to innovate as though we believe that God is actually at work in the world. Now is the time to try out the God sized dreams. Now is the time to locate people’s individual stories in the lineage of God’s overarching story. Now is the time to place cracks into the immanent frame that society clings to. Now is the time for the divinely called innovators across sectors to dream bigger. Now is the time to remember that people don’t need you to do everything for them, people are just looking for institutions to help them with the problems that are bigger than them. Now is the time to run ideas through our innovation systems and to plant, prune and tend those ideas. The ecumenical Black Church can still create new liminal spaces of belonging for all people. The ecumenical Black Church can still be a witness of God’s love and grace even during global turmoil.
I end this thesis in the way I began. I end it thinking about the concept of home and liminal spaces. Bell hooks takes her time articulating what belonging feels like in her text. I am convinced that all our social innovation would be worth it if on the other side of our work, people felt like they belonged somewhere. If social innovation can get rid of enough systemic injustices so that people feel like they belong somewhere, then we have done our job. I am persuaded that this is the work of the ecumenical Black Church in 2022 and beyond. We must continue doing our part to create socially innovative approaches to belonging for all. At the heart of our deepest need right now is a place to belong. The pandemic has re-ordered how and where people seek belonging, yet the search is still there. If the ecumenical Black Church is to plant, prune and tend big ideas around belonging it must be committed to keeping those ideas in beta mode. It must be willing to adjust based on the need that the people exhibit. The more people share about their needs, the more our innovative ideas should shift. Because as we do our ethnographic study of our communities, we begin to learn, what do they really need to feel like they belong? As we learn that answer we then go into the work of dreaming about what can be provided to begin to meet that need.

According to a national 2021 pew research study where 8,660 adults were surveyed, “3 in 4 Black adults have the same religious affiliation as when they were raised and 60% of Black adults who go to religious services attend places with most or all of the other attendees as well as the senior clergy are black.” My co-advisor, Dr. Keisha Cutright was quick to remind me that there is a difference in consumer behavior marketing trends between behavioral loyalty based on habit or lack of alternatives vs. loyalty that is based on positive attitudes toward a particular brand.

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Her question to me was, to what extent is identification with the ecumenical Black Church a function of active, positive attachment as opposed to a lack of alternatives? This question was hard for me. As a Black pastor who has dedicated my life to the church, it pains me to consider that people might be connected to the church for reasons of habit as opposed to desire. But the question is a necessary one, one worthy of our attention.

In a 1973 Journal of Market Research study by Jacoby & Kyner, we find a classic definition of brand loyalty as: “the biased behavioral response expressed over time by some decision-making unit with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands and is a function of psychological decision making evaluative processes.”5 The key element in this definition emphasizes the need for options to be apparent and for the consumer to have made evidence of actually purchasing something as opposed to simply discussing the idea of purchasing something. I would liken the idea of purchasing to the act of streaming a worship service on YouTube. YouTube is an arena where people have a plethora of choices. African Americans can easily watch a non-Black church experience with no judgement from the comfort of their own homes.

“Only 40% of churchgoers report watching their regular home church online. A rather surprising 23% said they streamed a different church (either in place of their regular church or in addition to their regular church).”6 This data is reported from Outreach Magazine in June 2020. It represents a trend that I am seeing anecdotally across our community. People are experimenting


with the idea of brand loyalty as it relates to churches that they feel connected to. This kind of data makes it hard to answer Dr. Cutright’s question of whether people are loyal to the ecumenical Black Church out of habit or active choice, but I find it compelling to see that as people virtually church hop on YouTube, they are still choosing to virtually visit Black Churches.

In a February 2021 article for *Time Magazine*, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates said, “Today, African Americans, like all Americans, are increasingly moving away from organized religion. Yet in nationwide surveys, roughly 80 percent of African Americans—more than any other group—report that religion is very important in their lives.”

With data like this, I believe it’s safe to say that the ecumenical Black Church still has a fighting chance to be a part of people’s lives. For some, The Black Church feels like home. For others, it might feel like a distant cousin or loved one whom they have to learn again, but I think the ecumenical Black Church still has enough going for it, to win back its community. Just like none of our homes of origin are perfect, the ecumenical Black Church is not perfect either. However, if pushed to be innovative in the areas that matter most to its community, I believe it can offer a sense of belonging to the Black community even if it is merely a liminal space as people try to find their footing during these trying times. Places of home and belonging matter. Bell hooks reflected on her own journey back home, post college in this way:

“Leaving racialized fear behind, I left the rhythms of porch swings, of hot nights filled with caring bodies and laughter lighting the dark like June bugs. To the West Coast I went to educate myself, away from the lazy apartheid of a Jim Crow that had been legislated away but was still nowhere near gone…I too returned home. To any southerner who has ever loved the South, it is always and eternally home…it is the air that truly

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comforts...That life was embodied for me in the world of the porch.”

As hooks talks about southerners returning home despite the racialized conflict that she knew she would no doubt encounter by going home, I believe the ecumenical Black Church is the kind of space that like the south for hooks, people want to return to. Their patterns may never return to attending on a weekly basis but I do believe people still feel a sense of belonging with the ecumenical Black Church. Belonging that draws them closer when they are in proximity of a Black Church that seems to be attempting to meet the most urgent needs of the people. Like hooks, many have left the ecumenical Black Church but like hooks’ peers, many have remained.

It is my assertion, that if the ecumenical Black Church would prioritize the work of social innovation, leaning on the disciplines of social innovation, social entrepreneurship, design thinking and social change organizations – I believe the ecumenical Black Church would find its relevance again. People need change. People need help. What better time than now for the ecumenical Black Church to take its eyes off of Sunday service and midweek bible study alone and to rather place its eyes on the innovative ways that it can meet the needs of its community. If done correctly, this kind of work will outlive any social crisis that the church finds itself in.

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BIOGRAPHY

Reverend Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes is an ordained Baptist minister, a writer, board member, innovation strategist and entrepreneur. At the age of 27, Rev. Gabby was hired as the Co-Young Adult Pastor at The Greater Allen Cathedral of New York under the senior leadership of Reverends Floyd & Elaine Flake. She served at the 15,000-member church in that capacity for five years. In 2018, Rev. Gabby co-founded with her husband, The Double Love Experience Church in Brooklyn, New York.

Prior to her work as a pastor, Rev. Gabby worked as a publicist, event planner & entrepreneur for a decade in the music industry in New York City. She worked with companies such as Beyoncé’s management company: Music World Entertainment, BET, Sony Records, eOne Music, & Plan A Media LLC. Her former clients include artists such as Jonathan McReynolds, Mary Mary, BeBe Winans and Mathew Knowles’ Music World Gospel roster. Rev. Gabby has since blended her brand strategist expertise with her expertise as a faith leader. While at Yale, she worked as The Senior Brand Strategist at the Dwight Hall Center for Social Justice & Public Change. She has coached and trained countless pastors & leaders on brand strategy. She continues to bridge the divide between innovation, strategy & the black church.

Rev. Gabby has been featured in publications such as Essence Magazine, Forbes, Yahoo News, Jet, The Vineyard Gazette, The New York Times, & CBS News for her work on love and ministry. She is a proud graduate of Yale University Divinity School where she serves on the alumni board, Hampton University and New York University. She is committed to the work of liberation. She was appointed to NYC Mayor Bill DeBlasio’s Covid-19 Clergy Task Force in March 2020 and served as an Eastern Region Convener of the Black Church Pac, where she trained
hundreds of clergy across the eastern region of the nation on matters of faith & voter engagement strategies in preparation for the 2020 presidential election.

Rev. Gabby is a regular on-air contributor to the nationally syndicated radio show: Get Up Mornings with Erica Campbell and a contributing writer to Faith & Leadership Magazine at Duke University. She is the recipient of numerous awards including the Guy R. Brewer Religious Leader Award, a senatorial citation from New York State Senator Leroy Comrie, The Charles S. Mersick Preaching Award from Yale University, the Outstanding Graduate Student award from the Afro-American Cultural Center at Yale, and more. Her first co-write with her husband will be released in the Fall of 2022 entitled: *Psalms for Black Lives: Reflections for the Work of Liberation* on Upper Room Books. Stay connected to her via: www.gabbycudjoewilkes.com