

# THE INNOVATIVE



# CHURCH

**How Leaders and Their Congregations  
Can Adapt in an  
Ever-Changing World**

**SCOTT CORMODE**

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**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# How the Church Is Calibrated for a World That No Longer Exists

**A**lmost everything about the current experience of church was established in a bygone era: the way we worship, the passages of Scripture we cherish, and the people we expect to see. The basic contours of church have not changed, even as the world has been transformed. The church as we know it is calibrated for a world that no longer exists.

Erica knows this all too well. In 2018 she brought her youth ministry team from Florida to Fuller Theological Seminary for an “innovation summit.”<sup>1</sup> Erica came to the summit bearing a burden: her young people needed help, she said, in navigating their way toward hope and joy in a world of suffering. But the old ways of doing church did not want to acknowledge her students’ pain. The old ways of leading a youth group involved distracting young people and promising a world free from pain; they did not focus on seeking a God who meets us in our pain. As Erica listened to her middle schoolers (and their parents), she could see that young people today are far more anxious, busy, and stressed than they were in the past, but the expectations of church life were no different. The old ways of being church are not calibrated to speak to the circumstances that Erica’s young people encounter each day.

The world has changed, but the church has not. The internet has transformed how people get information, social media has changed the meaning of community, and the post-2008 economy now expects more labor hours from the average worker. The basic assumptions about time, money, and community—and about membership, Bible study, and ecclesiology—have

all changed. But congregations act the way that they did before the climate changed, and congregants often wish that the world would just go back to the way it once was. The mental models that we Christians hold about the rudiments of church (about things such as worship, teaching, and fellowship) were formed in the mid-twentieth century, long before social changes transformed the meaning of almost every institution in society. As the theologian Dwight Zscheile wisely observed, “God’s promises in Christ are steadfast, but the shape and future of the church in America is increasingly uncertain” in an ever-changing world.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the pace of change is accelerating. Something new rolls over us even as we are still reeling from the last thing. In the past, the church had time to adjust between changes. It could absorb the initial shock of social change, wait for things to settle into an equilibrium, and then learn from those who had already adjusted to that new reality. But the wait-and-copy strategy will not work anymore. For most of the church’s history, Christians had up to a century to recalibrate in the face of a disruptive change such as the Industrial Revolution. Even in the twentieth century, the church typically had a generation to recalibrate to changes like the advent of the automobile or the rise of suburbia. But now, sweeping changes are happening years apart rather than decades apart.<sup>3</sup> There is not enough time between changes before the next wave hits. The wait-and-copy strategy will no longer work because we live in what one scholar has called “a world of permanent white water.”<sup>4</sup> The next wave will always come before we have adjusted. We will need to learn how to live in an ever-changing culture.

Even if a church figures out how to respond to some social change, it faces another problem. Congregations are tempted to make a change and then freeze that change—to breathe a sigh of relief that says they never have to change again. Think, for example, about changes in how we worship. In the late nineteenth century, cutting-edge Protestant churches incorporated organ music into their services. This was a controversial move. Established theologians opposed what they called the “innovators” who were spoiling the plain worship of God with their ostentation.<sup>5</sup> Of course, by the twentieth century congregations had become so accustomed to organ music that there was an anguished cry when innovators replaced organs with guitars. Once a change has been legitimated, congregations often demand that the change become permanent, even when the culture has moved on to something else. Neither the wait-and-copy strategy nor the change-and-freeze plan will help us. Clinging to these strategies means we are dancing to the rhythm of a song that no longer plays. We need a way to recalibrate in order to keep from getting out of touch with the needs of the world. That will take innovation.

## Innovative Congregations

A changed world demands innovation, and a changed religious world requires innovative congregations. But there is a problem. Most of the literature on innovation assumes that the best innovations will tear down the structures of the past and replace them with something better in just the way that the iPhone camera destroyed Kodak, and Amazon replaced Borders bookstores. “Cut the ties to the past,” some say. “Burn the boats.” But we Christians cannot do this. We are inextricably—and happily—bound to the past. We will never stop reading Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, we will never stop loving our neighbors as ourselves, and we will never stop saying, “Jesus is Lord.” We cannot abandon the past.

Every Christian’s faith depends on the inherited Christian tradition. We receive the faith; we do not invent it. No Christian, for example, invents practices like prayer or beliefs such as “Jesus is Lord.” We receive them—both from God and from those who came before us. We depend on the Christian tradition. Yet, as the theologian Gregory Jones points out, “Tradition is fundamentally different from traditionalism.” He quotes the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”<sup>6</sup> Although at some level we all know that the experience of Christianity has changed over the centuries (e.g., there are few current congregations that chant in Latin), our tendency is to believe that the present is better than the past and that the future should look about like the present.

All this makes new ideas look suspect. Yes, we must be grounded in the Bible as the authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, and yes, we must be anchored by the theological reflections of the historic Christian church.<sup>7</sup> Yet we cannot be shackled to the ways the gospel has always been presented. Christian innovation cannot abandon the past, but it must find new ways to express itself for the future.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the question of congregational innovation comes into focus. How do we Christians innovate when our credibility depends on continuity with the past and honoring tradition? To put it another way, *How do we maintain a rock-solid commitment to the unchanging Christian faith while at the same time finding innovative ways to express that faith in an ever-changing culture?*

That takes us back to the image of recalibrating. But how do we recalibrate? We recalibrate according to a standard. If I want to reset my watch, I look up the time from a standard I trust (usually my cell phone). If I sing, I follow the beat of the musicians. If I plant crops, I wait for the proper season to harvest them. But Christian recalibrating is particularly tricky

because we need to account for both the ever-changing culture and the never-changing gospel. We can do that using the dual standard of people and practices—that is, according to the longings and losses of the ever-changing people entrusted to our care and according to the practices that constitute the never-changing gospel. To do that, we must recalibrate our understanding of Christian leadership.

## **Planting and Watering**

If we think the world is predictable, we establish fixed routines hoping to create guaranteed outcomes. This would make leading a church like operating an assembly line. With an assembly line, you plug the right raw materials into the right machine and you know that every time you get just what you want coming out the other side. If you see a deviation, you stop and make adjustments until you get the expected result. But the world is not predictable enough for us to operate as an assembly line; we don't even know what tomorrow will bring.

We will need to think more like farmers. Farmers organize their efforts around the seasons of the year. They know to expect that spring will bring rain and summer will bring sunshine, but they never know how much rain or how much sun. Farmers have calibrated themselves to know what they can and what they cannot do, just as Christian leaders must. We need to have a view of leadership that acknowledges that God's work is decisive, that nothing we do can accomplish what we value most.

One short verse of the Bible summarizes Christian leadership. At the fractured founding of the church in Corinth, “[Paul] planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6 KJV). In Christian leadership, God's action is the decisive work. Paul and Apollos tended the Corinthian crops, but God made them grow. The Christian leaders did indeed have work to do, but it only mattered because of what God chose to do. The distinction is important because the work of Christian leadership is planting and watering. Indeed, this is a book about planting and watering.

We Christians spend our days and nights like farmers; we are tending the people whom God has entrusted to our care. But we cannot make the people grow. We do not operate an assembly line; there is no guaranteed outcome. We nurture our people by creating an environment conducive to growth, then we hand our people over to God. Only God can give the increase. If we are to innovate our way into the world that just now exists, we will need to think like farmers.

My grandfather was what the Bible calls a steward. He farmed 140 acres of citrus trees for a landowner who lived far away. The Hollow Hill Farm was entrusted to his care. He devoted himself to his trees, and he wanted them to bear fruit. But every season, he knew that it was God who gave the increase. So, if God did the decisive work, what did my grandfather do? He managed the environment that nurtured the orchard. Like Paul and Apollos, he spent his days planting and watering. While he could not guarantee a harvest, he could control the water, the soil, and the temperature that encouraged growth.

A farmer will go to great lengths to maintain that environment. For example, there were winter nights when my grandfather stayed up all night trying to deal with the cold. In the Southern California valley where he labored, the temperature occasionally dipped below freezing and threatened to kill the trees entrusted to his care. On those nights, he set up between each pair of trees what were called “smudge pots”—tall, fat pipes filled with burning motor oil. As they belched a smelly haze, they kept the trees from freezing. Smudging was exhausting and dirty work. All night long, he made sure each inky mess continued to burn. In the morning, my grandfather was covered with an oily residue, but his trees had survived. (If you lead in Jesus’s name, you too will have days when you find yourself covered in some sort of grime.) My grandfather was a steward with an orchard entrusted to his care. His planting and watering could not guarantee growth, but he could focus on creating an environment conducive for growth.

This idea that God does the decisive work changes the way we lead, and it even changes the way we see Christian practices like prayer. For example, I learned to pray differently when my wife, Genie, had cancer (cancer that was a lot more serious than either of us wanted to acknowledge out loud). I realized that at the time I had a fairly simplistic mental model of prayer, and I needed a deeper understanding. Sometimes I acted like I could obligate God, as if just the right prayer would control God so that God would do what I wanted. And sometimes I acted like it was just self-talk, as if all it did was make me feel better. I knew neither view was true, but I regularly acted as if they were. I needed an understanding of prayer that allowed me—like the farmer—to hand over to God the things that mattered most to me.

The insight came when I acknowledged that I was deeply invested in something I could neither influence nor control. I wanted to make my wife get well, but I could do nothing to guarantee the outcome I desperately desired. It was deeply disturbing. And, at first, that led to fatalism. I’d just say to myself that God would do what God would do and try not to think about what I could

not control. It was a way of emotionally protecting myself while overwhelmed by the initial shock of her cancer.

But eventually I found a way to express faith rather than fatalism.<sup>9</sup> I created a little ritual where each day I would start the morning by handing Genie over to God in just the way that a farmer has to turn his trees over to God. I did it each day as I began my commute because that was usually the first time I was alone with God. I would say (often aloud), “God, if I could take control of this myself, I would. But I can’t. I am left with no choice but to trust you. So, with fear and trembling, I hand Genie over to you.” While I said it, I would often make a gesture with my hands of lifting something up to God, asking God to accept this most precious thing from me.

That was a decade ago (she is fine now), but it changed the way I pray. I now see prayer as handing over my loved ones and my fears to God in an honest statement of belief and unbelief. I say (often aloud), “God, if I could make it happen myself, I would. But since I cannot, I hand this person (or situation) over to you. I believe; help my unbelief.” I recognize that I have a part to play when I pray in that I have to lift the person up to God, but it is God who does the decisive work. It would be a tragic mistake to think that my work was the most important part of prayer.

In a similar way, Christian leaders often make this mistake when they pursue Christian innovation. We cannot act as if our work is decisive, as if we could create a program or process that would guarantee our people will grow. When Erica came to Pasadena for the innovation summit, she had a wonderful sense that her people belonged to God and that only God could meet her people in their pain. But there are other Christian leaders who, often through a misguided sense of responsibility, search for the proper program, one that will be enough to ensure that their people will develop a life-altering faith in Jesus. It is too easy to forget that our faith is a gift of God. It is not the result of any program we create. All our work is planting and watering. Without planting and watering, the trees will not grow. We do what God asks us to do, and then we turn our people over to God—just as my grandfather handed his trees over to God.

My grandparents remained devoted to trees even after they moved off the farm. When they retired, they purchased the only home they ever owned—a tiny house with a dozen enormous citrus trees off to the side. It was not so much a home as a small orchard with a house attached. Even decades after they retired, my 103-year-old grandmother would regularly hobble out into the orchard with her walker to irrigate her trees. It was both a burden and a pleasure for her; it was who she was. Grampa smudged, Gramma watered, and God gave the increase. Even in retirement, they had an orchard for which to care.

Every Christian leader has people entrusted to their care. Perhaps you do not have a traditional orchard. Maybe you tend an urban community garden or care for ancient, splintered trees. You may have a grove with many trees or just a few isolated plants. But every Christian leader is a steward. Each of us plants and waters those entrusted to our care.

## The Christian Innovation Questions

Innovation often comes not through new answers to old questions but rather from asking new questions about everyday experiences. When the renowned scholar Peter Drucker wanted to recast the work of business, he created five new questions that every enterprise needed to answer.<sup>10</sup> They are often whittled down to this common shorthand: Who is your customer, and what does this customer value? Because these questions were originally created for businesses, they assume a “customer” who will pay a fee in exchange for a product or service. We Christians need a different set of questions because producing a profit is not our goal; we do not need to know what the market will bear. Thus, we can create a set of questions that are similar to the Drucker Questions, questions that can guide Christians and Christian organizations in their pursuit of God’s purposes.

The questions will guide our planting and watering, but they begin not with our efforts but with God’s work in the world. Second Corinthians 5:19 says that God was “reconciling the world to himself in Christ” and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Cor. 5:20).<sup>11</sup> We are invited to partner with God in the work that God is already doing in the world. That’s what it means to be an ambassador. An ambassador<sup>12</sup> is someone who stands between two peoples<sup>13</sup> just as Jesus, the Incarnate Son, stood between God and humanity. An ambassador is a citizen of one country who goes to reside in another country with the expressed purpose of creating good relations between the two. Every Christian is called to be an ambassador. A Christian ambassador is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven who lives for a while as a citizen of this earth for the express purpose of creating good relations between the two. We Christians represent Jesus in different settings, at different venues, among different peoples. But ultimately each one of us is *called* to be an ambassador. We need a set of questions that will enable us to calibrate our work as ambassadors of God’s kingdom in this world.

Allow me to describe the questions here, knowing that we will flesh them out over the course of the next few chapters.

- Q1. Who are the people entrusted to your care?
- Q2. How do those people experience the longings and losses that make up the human condition?
- Q3. What Big Lies do your people believe that prevent them from hearing the gospel?
- Q4. How do you make spiritual sense of those longings and losses?
- Q5. How do you express that spiritual meaning as a shared story of hope?

Let us return to Erica, the youth minister who came to Pasadena to learn about innovation. As Erica worked through the process of innovation, she answered the five questions. The first three questions helped her stay connected to the ever-changing experience of her people, and the final two questions helped her construct a response that was anchored in the never-changing gospel. Let's look at Erica's response to each question. Together the questions allowed her to create *a shared story of hope to make spiritual sense of the longings and losses of the people entrusted to her care*. That is Christian innovation.

- Q1. Who are the people entrusted to your care?

Christian leaders do not have “followers”—only Jesus has followers. Instead, Christian leaders have people entrusted to their care. There are three theological reasons for recasting the mental model of leadership to be about “a people entrusted to your care.” First, it emphasizes God's role as the one doing the entrusting. Second, it emphasizes that we are stewards of people who already belong to God. And third, it says that the measure of good work is not my intentions but instead the effect my work has on the people entrusted to my care.

Too often churches pursue innovation for the wrong reasons. The goal cannot be “to save the church” or “to bring in young families” or any goal that focuses on the church as an institution. The goal of innovation has to be fixed on the people whom God entrusts to our care, and that means knowing who you serve.

Erica came to Fuller with a clear sense of who she was called to serve. Her first responsibility was to her youth group, especially the large percentage of middle schoolers. After that, she recognized an additional responsibility to the teens' parents and to the congregation as a whole. But from the start, Erica recognized that her calling was centered on the middle schoolers entrusted to her care.

- Q2. How do those people experience the longings and losses that make up the human condition?

Leadership begins with listening.<sup>14</sup> The greatest act of leadership began with the greatest act of listening, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He did not just walk in our shoes; he walked with our feet. Every time God entrusts a person to my care I have to begin by listening, because before I can invite a person into a new story I have to understand that person's particular backstory. I have to understand what matters most to them—what stories define them. Only then will I be able to invite them into a gospel story that gives them hope. Otherwise, I am just treating them as a stereotype.

What do we listen for? Sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that the reason our current crop of congregations is in crisis is that we have been listening for the wrong things.<sup>15</sup> Most leaders listen to the things that are important to their congregations rather than to the things that are important to their people. We need to listen to the issues that matter most to the people entrusted to our care—issues such as work and money, or health and family. These are the universal issues that comprise the human condition,<sup>16</sup> and every person asks fundamental questions about life, death, relationships, and how it all has meaning. These are the things that keep people awake at night.

For example, I recently heard a sermon preached to a community that was going through a recent and devastating loss. Having heard about the community's pain, I expected the sermon to address the anxious mood of the congregants; instead, the preacher preached a doctrinal sermon about the confession of sin. He never mentioned the community's pain. The preacher did not think about the things that keep people awake at night. The week before his sermon, I am sure far more people laid awake thinking about their community's fearful situation rather than about unconfessed sin. I am not saying preaching on sin is wrong; indeed, it is one of the things that the church must discuss. I am saying that in this case it was tone-deaf. If you are waiting with a distraught family in an emergency room, you would not take that moment to talk to the family about unconfessed sin. It would be callous. Likewise, when people are fearful and struggling, our preaching and teaching need to address the things that keep people awake at night.

We often make the mistake of thinking that we listen so that we will know what to say. Instead, we should listen so that we will be transformed by what we hear. If I listen with real empathy to the longings and losses of my people, then it cannot help but transform me. But that requires us to be careful about what we mean by empathy.<sup>17</sup> Empathy requires me to call up within myself the feeling that I see before me. If you tell me a story of loss—say, you feel anxious about how to care for your ailing parents—I may not be old enough to have ailing parents, but I have worried about sick friends and family. Empathy requires me to do more than observe your pain; it asks me to call up within

myself the feeling I had when I worried about a loved one. When you see in me that I have shared your feeling, that connection creates the bond we call empathy. We will call this “transformative listening” because the goal is for the listener to be transformed by what they hear.

Before Erica came to Pasadena, she engaged her team in a listening project. As they listened to their middle schoolers, they heard about the things that keep them awake at night: “school stress, fitting in, sports performance, social media, family dysfunction, homework,” as well as what Erica’s team came to describe as “sources of worth failures (predicted and experienced).”<sup>18</sup> The listening led them to see their people as anxious, busy, and stressed and to know that any innovation they proposed had to address the painful longings they heard.

### Q3. What Big Lies do your people believe that prevent them from hearing the gospel?

Longings and losses are such a powerful and indeed overwhelming part of most people’s lives that we tend to create ways to simply cope with the questions rather than find ways to actually address the human condition. Our people can feel overwhelmed by their longings and losses, and they often take refuge in Big Lies. A Big Lie is a distorted belief—a way of seeing the world that upholds a falsehood.

We are all familiar with Big Lies that compete with the gospel. Big Lies might include ideas such as these: “Money can buy happiness.” “Look out for yourself first.” “Greed is good.” But the subtler Big Lies are often distortions that we have adopted in the church. We may not say these things out loud, but our behaviors show that we act as if they are true. For example, in my innovation work with congregations, we have seen Christians who believed (perhaps silently) that “Some sins are worse than others and they will define you, while some sins are excusable and they will not affect you” or “Not doing bad things makes up for not doing good things” or “Good Christians will be successful.” Your people may not believe those exact Big Lies, but we all believe Big Lies that distort the gospel.

Indeed, the world around us often depends on such Big Lies. Think of the Big Lies at a shopping mall (e.g., “You are what you wear,” “The customer is always right,” “You are only important for what you can spend”) or the Big Lies embedded in social media (“You are what you post,” “Friendship is the same as having followers,” and “Community equals attention”). There are even Big Lies that distort Christian practices (e.g., “Sunday attendance equals worship” or “The church exists to fulfill my needs”). Big Lies block

us from seeing the truth of the gospel and prevent us from knowing the love of God.

As part of Erica's online preparation to come to the Fuller innovation summit, she listened not only to the longings and losses of her middle schoolers but also for the Big Lie that was underneath their anxious, busy, and stressed lives. At the core, she found that they were constantly asking themselves "Am I valuable?" This led her to articulate their Big Lie as saying, "Love is conditional." Although no one spoke the phrase aloud, the sentiment summarized the fear of conditional acceptance that nagged her young people each day. And she came to see that whatever innovation project she pursued needed to provide a spiritual antidote to that Big Lie. Ultimately, she said, she wanted the project to provide her young people with what she called a "grace-based identity" that would allow them to experience "being known and loved anyway."

#### Q4. How do you make spiritual sense of those longings and losses?

Every Christian leader is called to make spiritual sense.<sup>19</sup> Understanding the longings and losses of the people entrusted to our care is the necessary beginning, but it cannot be all that we do. We Christians will need to make spiritual sense of the longings and losses of the people entrusted to our care, and in doing so, we will join a great cloud of biblical witnesses. Throughout the Bible we see God's appointed leader explaining the spiritual meaning of the people's common experience.

Look at the way that Jesus taught. Jesus repeatedly reframed the very meaning of the law. For example, he said, "Let him who has no sin cast the first stone"<sup>20</sup> and punctured the self-righteous arrogance of a crowd that could no longer see its own sin. He also extended the law in new and uncomfortable ways, using the story of the good Samaritan to show that "love thy neighbor" extends beyond the comfortable confines of polite society. Jesus offered an interpretation ("The last shall be first") that refocused people's lives. They thought that power and prestige signaled God's blessing, but it was a Big Lie. Instead, he offered an image of a servant who dies on behalf of his people, saying to his followers, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Jesus made spiritual sense of the longings and losses of the people entrusted to his care.

That is exactly what Erica set out to do once she had recognized that her middle schoolers believed the Big Lie that love is conditional. She wanted to provide them with "an identity found in God, not conditional acceptance," one that gave them what she called the "liberating sense of being known and loved anyway." She decided to do this by focusing on the Christian

practice of lament, because in lament we are invited to speak honestly to God—even if we are angry at God. By introducing her middle schoolers to lament, she taught them that God would love them despite the messiness of their lives.

Christian practices are particularly useful for innovation because they are both new and old at the same time. They are old because each practice has been an essential part of Christianity since its inception. They are new because the expression of each practice changes drastically over time. But, along the way, we have forgotten (or neglected) some practices. Recovering those practices can accelerate innovation. As part of the preparation for the innovation summit, we introduced Erica to several reinvented Christian practices, which included lament (we will meet these practices in chap. 5). In learning about lament, she was able to imagine ways to use this ancient practice to help her middle schoolers create a “grace-based identity” that refuted that “conditional acceptance” they experienced every day.

Christian practices are a way of planting and watering. They create an environment for growth. They represent the received wisdom of our forebears in just the way that smudge pots (and, now, wind machines) represent the received wisdom of the farmers that came before us. But do not think for a moment that this planting and watering can ensure growth. Only God gives the increase. Indeed, as Second Corinthians assures us, God works through our weakness. None of our inadequate planting and watering guarantees growth any more than the practice of prayer obligates God. We pray because God invites us (indeed, commands us) to pray. But, like all Christian practices, our prayers take us back into the hands of God. We plant and water through practices, but only God can give the increase.

In the same way, the Christian practice of lament allows us to express our honest emotion (even and especially if we are angry at God) and still, in the end, hand our lives back to God. Erica used a Mad Libs format to teach her middle schoolers to talk to God the way the psalms talk to God. She wrote a simple lament, using almost a Mad Libs style for each of the components:

- God, I don’t understand \_\_\_\_\_.
- God, please fix \_\_\_\_\_.
- God, I trust you with my future even if \_\_\_\_\_.
- God, I will praise you even when \_\_\_\_\_.

That structure became the way that she would help her young people make spiritual sense of their anxious, busy, and stressed lives. She believed that if

they could express themselves honestly to God, it would be “liberating and provide an honest connection” that would rebut the Big Lie of conditional acceptance that poisoned their lives. For weeks, Erica invited her middle schoolers to fill in the Mad Libs structure so they could express their pain to God. And, after the young people had spent enough time using the Mad Libs, they felt comfortable writing their own laments.

Q5. How do you express that spiritual meaning as a shared story of hope?

The ultimate goal of Christian innovation is to invite our people into a new story—a communal story, a hopeful story. How are people transformed? People do not latch on to a plan or an abstract statement of doctrine. That does not change them. Instead, people are transformed when they participate in a story—a story that sets them on a specific trajectory.<sup>21</sup>

Let us follow the model of Jesus. Jesus invited people into the stories we now call parables. He told the story, for instance, of a man beaten and robbed on the road to Jericho and of the Samaritan man who unexpectedly cared for him. In another parable, Jesus invited people to see themselves in a story about a young son who squandered his inheritance but who was embraced by his father on his return, and he asked them to examine whether they might be like the older brother who was insulted by his father’s kindness. And Jesus repeatedly said, “The kingdom of God is like . . .” He did not so much define the kingdom of God with detailed teaching as invite people into a vision of what God intended, a vision where “the last shall be first,” a vision presented through stories.<sup>22</sup>

Ella Saltmarshe has written about how stories enable people to change.<sup>23</sup> She explains that stories do three things—three things that we will need if we are to recalibrate in accord with both the ever-changing culture and the never-changing gospel. First, *stories help people make sense of their lives*.<sup>24</sup> Scholars tell us that data enters our senses as a jumble with little meaning. Our brains have learned, however, to organize that data into patterns. Those patterns are often stories.

Second, Saltmarshe describes how *stories bind people together* to create communities. She includes this wonderful quotation from the novelist John Steinbeck: “We are lonesome animals,” he wrote, who “spend all of our life trying to be less lonesome.” And that is where stories come in. We tell stories, Steinbeck goes on to say, “begging the listener to [say] ‘yes, that is the way it is, or at least that’s the way I feel.’” When listeners hear themselves in our story, they can reevaluate their own situation and come to the conclusion, “You’re not as alone as you thought.”<sup>25</sup> Shared stories create a

connection. And that story-shaped connection builds community. Shared stories create hope.

Third, Saltmarsh says that we can use new stories to *reauthor the stories that define us*. We all tell ourselves stories—stories that define us. A defining story may be a personal narrative like “God can never forgive what I have done.” Or it may be a cultural narrative like “Society has taught me to think of myself as inferior.” Or it may be a theological narrative like “God keeps score, and I will never measure up.” Those stories define us—and often cage us. One of the most powerful things a Christian leader can do is to offer someone a story that re-narrates their life—a story that replaces a Big Lie (like “God can never forgive me”) with the truth of the gospel (like forgiveness is available “for all who believe” regardless of what they have done [Rom. 3:22]).

What, then, are the stories that define us as Christians? “I [am] crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20); “Deny [yourself], and take up [your] cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23); “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 19:19). Each of these invites us to picture ourselves imitating the contours of the stories that Jesus told to his followers. We welcome this invitation, but, at the same time, we recognize that we need something more specific as we live our daily lives. That is where Christian practices come in.

Christian practices are ritualized stories.<sup>26</sup> They give a contour—a narrative pathway—for us to follow. Christians practice hospitality, for example. Hospitality has been a Christian practice since the days of the apostles.<sup>27</sup> And Christian hospitality means more than a potluck meal. It involves treating outsiders like they are insiders and offering outsiders the privileges (like sitting at table) that are normally reserved for insiders. If we want to reauthor our lives to match the contours of the self-giving Savior who calls us to deny ourselves, then we will find ourselves practicing a hospitality that asks for nothing in return. No reciprocity. No expectation of gratitude. The Christian practice of hospitality gives to others solely because we have received a free gift of grace from the God who loves us. We enact the faith by living out these practices, by conforming our lives to the practices that have characterized Christianity from the beginning.

I define vision as “a shared story of hope.” Vision inspires people and entices them to participate in something that is larger than themselves.<sup>28</sup> To reiterate, people are not changed by plans or doctrines; rather, people are transformed when they connect with a story that compels them to alter their trajectory.

Sometimes that transforming can happen when the story finally names the deep difficulty that a person feels. I think that, for example, a significant

part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s early success was not about offering a plan but rather about naming a dilemma. When he talked about what it meant to be trapped by Jim Crow laws, people recognized themselves in that story. And when it came time to offer a plan, that too came in the form of a story. Indeed, his "I Have a Dream" speech was a vision in the form of a story. His audience did not come to some intellectual decision that nonviolence was the best philosophy (although Dr. King himself had done just that).<sup>29</sup> They "bought into" the vision because they could picture it. They could see the story playing out. And they could see themselves in the story. Vision is a shared story of hope.

We Christians offer something more specific than "future hope." We offer a hope rooted in the gospel—rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christian hope is different from other kinds of hope. When you hear a person say, "I hope it does not rain," they are expressing a wish for the future. They may or may not have much reason to believe that their wish will come true. But that is what they want. Christian hope is different. Our hope is not in *something* (like the weather); our hope is in *someone* (our Savior). So Christian hope is more like a quiet confidence. It is the sense that all our eggs are in Jesus's basket, and that is just fine. And we communicate that hope by inviting people into stories, just as Jesus did.

And that is what Erica did with her middle schoolers. The most powerful part of the experience for the young people was writing their own laments. Their experience with the Mad Libs format eventually gave them the confidence to write what was in their hearts.

Erica engaged in Christian innovation. She focused on the longings and losses (Q2) of the middle schoolers entrusted to her care (Q1). She refuted the Big Lie that "love is conditional" (Q3) by allowing them to experience through lament the idea that "God knows you and loves you anyway" (Q4), which created for them a way of narrating their life (Q5) that said that, when they see themselves as God's beloved, they are free to be their authentic selves. The old model of being church told Erica that the way to minister to middle schoolers was to teach them to behave. This innovation, instead, allowed her to proclaim that "God can handle whatever they throw at God, and God won't run away; and that's our youth group."