

Transformation in Community: Discerning Innovative Ways Forward in Missions

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Introduction

Innovation often springs from a need or opportunity. There is a problem, a challenge or an issue that needs to be addressed, or changing circumstances that present new possibilities. That's also true for missions innovation. When people think about innovation in missions, they often think about technological innovations, the use of web apps like TikTok, new ways to do translation work like Katie Kuykendall outlines in her *MF* article from 2018 called "There's an App for that,"¹ or ways to get the gospel into closed countries through media. These are fantastic but are not the primary area of innovation we have wanted to explore in Frontier Ventures' Winter Launch Lab.

So what challenges or issues have grabbed our attention? We are intrigued with the challenge of exploring local and culturally relevant ways for least-reached peoples to experience new life in Jesus. This requires prayerfully discerning new ways to express and live out the gospel where it has been rejected for hundreds of years.

For example, the gospel has been in the Buddhist world for generations, but there have not been many movements to Jesus in the majority-Buddhist countries. Why is that? Another example would be the country of India, where, according to tradition, the Apostle Thomas witnessed 2,000 years ago. There are some great movements of God in India, but many castes and sections of the country have never seen a Jesus movement. Why is that, even after many centuries? These types of complex gospel challenges are the ones we would like to prayerfully consider in order to discern innovative ways forward.

¹ Kuykendall, K. (n.d.). *There's an App for That: Technology Transforms Bible Translation*. Retrieved May 14, 2021, from <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/theres-an-app-for-that1>

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We jumped in with both feet. And after a number of attempts at innovation in Muslim, diaspora, and Hindu contexts, we came to realize there was another significant barrier—an unexpected challenge. In order to pursue this type of innovation, we ourselves had to become a different type of person. There is a need for humility, flexibility, holy curiosity, self-awareness, Spirit-sensitive creativity and faithfulness in discerning how Jesus is leading. We realized that at its heart, innovation in mission is about the process of transformation as God shifts our ministry paradigms, focuses our vision and calls us into new expressions of His kingdom we might not have imagined before. In other words, we are not only seeking fresh ideas or new ways of delivering the gospel message, but we are also expecting God to reshape us in the process. Who we are matters greatly for how we see and understand the challenges, how we live in healthy relationships, and how then to creatively act and follow God's lead in the world. Ways forward to address long-standing challenges will emerge from new ways of being in Jesus and walking alongside others at the frontiers of mission.

As a group goes through an innovation process of seeking understanding, prayerfully reflecting, and then discerning new ways forward together, everyone in the group is changed. In one innovation group we facilitated someone said, "If we take this step to consider these things, we will

be changed people. This process will change us. Is that okay with us?” It is not enough just to think differently. The barriers to the gospel at the frontiers of mission are deeply spiritual, in addition to all the complex social, cultural, religious, and linguistic factors. They require us to be different.

This is why we call our innovation process a Transformation Collaborative. It is a group spiritual journey as well as a personal spiritual journey into the challenge, into the call of God to innovate.

So, in a Transformation Collaborative, who is a part of the group that will be transformed, and what is the process we follow to move toward transformative innovation?

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Forming the Innovation Community

We begin with the conviction that innovation in mission will emerge from worshipping and praying communities that are committed to walking together with God and one another. While God blesses human creativity and ingenuity, He also leads and gives vision and wisdom as a community prayerfully looks to Him. Ways forward will emerge from a group that is centered in Jesus, committed to relationships like Jesus is, and who accept that God wants them to bring their full selves to the innovation process. If the desire of God is to be glorified and dwell among His people, then the ways in which we move toward that end ought to embrace the importance of unity in community.

With this communal aim in mind, formation of the group begins with one or more catalyst leaders who have some sense of call to respond to a complex gospel challenge. These are often people with expertise, capacity, and connection to rally others, to champion an issue, and possibly even to catalyze movements. Walking with them, we assist in the process of clarifying the challenge. That challenge is formulated in a question that expresses

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curiosity and invites further exploration. For example, how might we bridge the gap between Buddhist and Christian worldviews so that Buddhists are able to understand the gospel as Good News? Or how might we incorporate whole-person healthcare (mind, body, spirit) into the DNA of movements to Jesus? Or how might we imagine appropriate ways for Hindus to begin following Jesus and remain in their families?

With some initial direction in place, the next step is for the catalyst leaders to begin inviting a larger, diverse community of others around the challenge as members of the core team. The aim for this core team is to become a prayerful and discerning community that will explore their shared challenge together. Just by looking at the example questions above, it is quickly apparent that the core team will need to include representatives from the relevant global communities and backgrounds to meaningfully respond to these challenges.² Bringing their whole selves to the group, the team's diverse perspectives and life experiences of following Jesus aid in the process of exploring complex gospel challenges and being transformed together as a community in Christ.

Allow us to give you a picture of what this looks like.

The Innovation Community's Discernment Process

When we walk with a group facing new challenges and opportunities in mission, there are some important questions we all should be asking. How is God already at work? In what ways is the Spirit inspiring us, giving us vision? As Jesus shepherds us forward, what might He be saying to us? Where do we sense He might be leading us?

Along with these prayerful questions we might also be asking, who are all the stakeholders involved—who is impacted by this challenge? Who might benefit from the creation of new opportunities? Who is missing out on life in Jesus? These questions help us to know where to begin carefully and humbly listening to others.

And underneath that we are asking, what are the deeper barriers and contributing factors? What are the relational or systemic patterns that are dysfunctional, not bearing fruit of blessing and righteousness? What is happening spiritually that might require intentional intercession?

² For example, movements themselves should be the ones discerning and making sense of new ways forward in their contexts. To the extent that others, or particularly Westerners, are involved, they will be walking alongside and encouraging in the process.

Discernment in innovation is about seeing rightly so that we might become wise and faithful in all our being, living and doing.

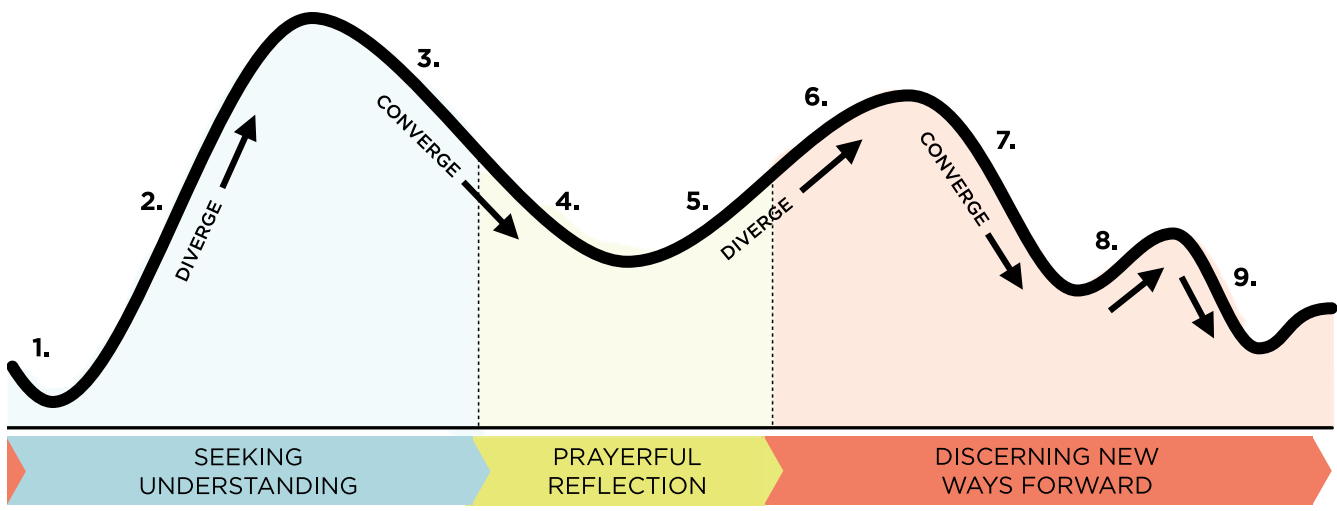
What are the opportunities and possibilities? These questions are about making sense of the challenge. We may begin with some starting understanding, but that will only get us so far: often challenges in mission are challenges precisely because our current understanding and practice are not enough. We will need to prayerfully explore and discover new insights that point toward possible ways forward.

The Winter Launch Lab's iterative approach to innovation and discernment encompasses three main phases (see graphic on the following page):

- *Seeking understanding* around the complex problem through prayer, interviews, Scripture study, research, and experiential learning
- *Prayerful reflection* on emerging insights and any initial sense of where God might be leading
- *Discerning new ways forward* by designing creative prototype initiatives that lead to further innovative insights and breakthroughs

Throughout the process we bring together innovation practices of design and systems thinking with group spiritual discernment. That means prayer and discernment play a central role in *both divergent and convergent ways of thinking*.

Divergence is about exploration of our curiosities and the creation of possibilities. It widens the scope to include more information. Convergence is the opposite: it is about synthesizing information to draw out insights, limiting options, and making decisions. Normally prayerful discernment is associated with convergent thinking. We all turn to God asking for direction when we are trying to make a decision. That still holds true here: when a group needs to decide which direction to move or which prototype(s) to create and test, it is important to make space for team members to sense how God might be leading. But that is only one expression of prayer in the innovation process.



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| 1. Gather what we know | 4. Submit everything to God | 6. Generate ideas |
| 2. Prayerful discovery | 5. Imagine future possibilities | 7. Discern prototypes |
| 3. Synthesize insights | | 8. Test for feedback |

For us, discernment in innovation is about seeing rightly so that we might become wise and faithful in all our being, living and doing. Let us unpack this statement. While *seeing rightly* certainly includes convergence, narrowing toward decisions for ways forward, it also includes divergence as we together prayerfully explore ways to understand the challenge and envision new possibilities. In an innovation process we need the Spirit's help and inspiration to perceive or imagine other ways of framing the challenge and creatively responding. From there, *wisdom* is about synthesizing the understanding and insights that emerge from beginning to see well. These insights not only signal direction for potential ways forward but can also impact and change us. They have real implications for who we are in Jesus, in the world. By sensing how God is already at work in a context and what He might desire to do to express His character and blessing, we are then also able to act *faithfully*. That takes place at the level of our *being*, as we are being conformed and transformed into His image in agreement with His purposes. It also plays out in our *living* and the ways we form relationships and are present to God and others. And finally, changes in our being and living will impact and shape our *doing* as we also discern the next practical steps to take together, in alignment with the ways we have sensed God is leading us. The journey of prayerful discovery and discernment is also the journey of transformation.

Iterative Discernment & Transformation

We in the Winter Launch Lab recognize that discernment and hearing God's voice or leadership can be a messy and uncertain thing. Some traditions emphasize God's will in such a way that it is a search for a specific and sometimes hard-to-find answer. It can be paralyzing. Others move in the opposite direction, suggesting that believers already know God's general will and can follow it in many ways, believing we're too small to disrupt God's purposes for our lives or contexts through our decisions about career paths, spouses or houses. Our approach is somewhere in the middle, emphasizing both that God desires to speak and lead the innovating community, but that He also invites our own participation as people who are also being formed over time to desire His kingdom.

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When it comes to exploring new ways for the least-reached to experience life in Jesus, we already know the general will of God—that is not the question. The issue is that there are difficult barriers where current practices

and understanding are not sufficient to see new movement to Jesus. Even worse, sometimes it is our own attitudes and approaches to mission that are part of the problem! Our knowledge, wisdom, and creativity are not always enough because the things we are hoping for—God moving to bless peoples and reconcile them to Himself—are only done by God. So without creating a trapping dependency on hearing a specific set of instructions from God, in our innovation process we recognize the need to humbly and prayerfully do our best to align our hearts and intentions with God's heart and desires.

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Sometimes there are moments of great clarity where God is surely moving, speaking, and guiding in some specific directions. On other occasions ways forward may not quickly emerge, but it is that intentionality of listening, reflecting, discerning, trying small things and giving space for feedback through which we may learn and discern together how God is leading over time. It is in the midst of life that God shapes us and forms all of us, and it is in the midst of challenging contexts that we listen, reflect, and pray about next steps in an iterative way, rather than expecting God to show us the entire path at once.

Importantly, all of this happens in the context of group discernment. We hope to see groups genuinely discern and follow the will of God in the context of diverse community that brings their full selves, formed over time in their own walks with Jesus. While prayerful discernment is always a subjective matter, a group seeking God's guidance, sitting at His feet in prayer, and listening carefully with an open mind, heart and will is a healthy and balanced starting point. In a safe space it is possible for a group to share and reflect on the ways they sense God might be leading and to practice self-awareness about the lenses through which they are hearing. This allows openness to the move of the Spirit while grounded in a space of contemplation and

waiting on the Lord. It also allows the wisdom of diverse perspectives and experiences to balance the potential for quickly running in a direction of an individual's interests. In summary, just as God forms us over time, He also forms us in the midst of community.

Conclusion

For the most difficult challenges in mission, this type of transformation is paramount. To be able to perceive and lean into the new things that God is desiring to do in the world, we need to be a different kind of people. This is not simply a deconstruction of Western missions practices, though some of that critique may be required, but an openness to being led by God into new and life-giving ways of being in Jesus outside of our cultural models and worldviews. The paths of following Jesus at the frontiers might look and sound quite different all while following the same Jesus who shepherds us.

In one Transformation Collaborative, after sitting with the Scriptures for some time, we asked the core group and catalyst leader to spend an hour or so in individual prayer. The group was going in a nice direction, and it was time to make some decisions. We did not expect what happened next. Instead of coming back from prayer fully ready to move forward, more than half the group came back and confessed to one another that they were repenting from sins and from following Jesus in ways culturally foreign to their context. The group did eventually take steps toward innovation, but the key moment of the entire time was that repentance. This transformative time of prayer and discernment was the backbone of the innovation that was to come.

In our experience to date, innovation in missions includes the whole person, bringing our full lives and selves, and that means new ways forward will include our own transformation in communities. 

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