



The Posture of Trees: A Picture of Church Leadership

By Alexa Eisenbarth

In early March, the Lilly Endowment held a consultation for all of the innovation hubs around the country who are attempting to research and respond to the seeming lack of young adults in the institutional church. While each hub has created their own model for research, each team is tasked with *listening to young adults in their communities* before designing a ministry project with young adults in mind. As we listened to young adults in Chicagoland, we heard five common themes concerning their spiritual lives and social engagement: Welcoming and Accessible; Relevant and Relatable Leaders; Relationships, Connection and Community; Spiritual Practices; Social Justice Oriented; Painful Past Experiences of Church; Ambivalence about Christian label. You can read more about these findings and our research [here](#).

When we gathered with the other innovation hubs in Indianapolis, we learned that many of the themes we heard from the young adults in our participating congregations were heard around the country, with some distinguishing variations, and even different vocabulary, as well. Everyone, however, could speak to the fruitfulness of listening to young adults in their respective communities. Additionally, the themes which emerged from these listening sessions do not offer a clear formula for designing ministry for young adults. In fact, the participating congregations worship and practice their faith in very different ways. What we know is that churches in every denomination and theological tradition are being called to do a new thing with God, and we trust that God is already doing a new thing in the world, with or without us.

So, how do we do a new thing with God? How do we become innovative in our ministerial contexts? What is the secret ingredient to ministry offered to us by the experts which will draw hoards of young adults into

our churches? Sorry to disappoint, but there isn't one. What we did learn is that embodying the right posture will allow us to innovate. L. Gregory Jones calls this posture *traditioned innovation*. He encourages leaders to root their feet in the tradition, with their hands open to the future, to possibilities.

This posture evokes a spirit of being like a tree. L. Gregory Jones writes, "we would recognize the importance of the past for the present if our metaphors were more centrally organic rather than mechanistic... Innovation is rooted in the organic requirement of self-renewal, and that requires attention to both the past (continuity) as well as the future (change)."¹ So let's run with it. Let's imagine together that each church (meaning here a particular community of faith which finds and creates meaning in a particular common place and time which has a history and possible future) is a tree. Each tree stands rooted in their particular place, having grown out of their particular patch of soil, from a particular seed, under specific conditions. Perhaps the trees surrounding this particular tree sheltered the new tree when it was just a baby tree. Maybe like some pine trees, a fallen tree was its birthplace. Probably, a seed from one tree blew in the wind and took root in another plot of soil, perhaps even miles away. Do the knots and grooves of the bark look exactly the same? Does the skin of the birch peel off in the same way? Does the fruit taste exactly the same? While some are aspen, whose roots spread and spring up new trees, one next to the other, creating a forest of identical twin trees, other species of trees stand alone, and may not ever reproduce. Some trees become diseased, and even our benevolent efforts may not save that diseased tree. And further, some environments are not hospitable to trees; sagebrush springs up instead, and tumbleweeds are blown by the desert wind on a regular basis.

¹ L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 53-54.

Here's the danger: we have often thought that the church is the structure we have built with the wood from the tree. This is the sin of idolatry. Those things we've built together: the ideologies, the buildings, the organizational structures, and the programs, they are not the church itself, they are not God. However, I believe, they do have their proper place. The things we build are not necessarily bad, but we have forgotten from whence they have come, the soil that grew the wood, and the branches from which their fruit fell.

The new thing we must do with God is tend to the growth of a new tree, or a new plant, from which new organizational structures and programs and pedagogies and hermeneutical lenses will be borne. This tree, as I envision it, is one which has roots both deep and wide, reaching into the depths of time and liturgical practice to reimagine practices and thought, while also reaching wide to into the wellsprings available to us, those wellsprings which nourish other traditions; meanwhile offering to others the life-water which nourishes our own tradition as well. At the consultation, I found myself in a room with religious leaders from the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Presbyterian, Evangelical Non-Denominational, and Wesleyan traditions, each addressing similar challenges in their contexts to engage young adults, and all being able to learn from the others. It will be this wide-reaching root system which will enliven each of us. I am reminded of that gospel story about loaves and fish; when we share, there is enough to go around.

Additionally, our branches must extend wider than they have before, providing shelter for more and more people than we've ever sheltered before. Young adults are finding existential meaning in leading and participating in the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, among others, signaling that intentional care, protection, inclusion, and empowerment of marginalized people are important enough to young adults to become national and even worldwide cultural shifts. Peter Berger, a sociologist of the twentieth century, writes in *The Sacred Canopy* that "every human society is an enterprise of world-building."² It is the nature of societies build institutions and systems of thought which help people make sense of the world, to offer order and shelter.³ I understand this world-building as a gift and responsibility from God, and I

think that the church has a particular calling to build a world which has order and meaning. However, when we so love the thing that we've built rather than the people it shelters and the God it's supposed to bless, people find meaning elsewhere, that world with order and meaning and shelter is built in other spaces and places.

Those churches which have not idolized the things they have built are now able to provide shelters for new ventures, knowing that the fallen leaves from their branches have fertilized the ground each year, preparing the soil for something new to spring up with hopeful persistence. Whatever springs up will have come from the same soil, perhaps slightly changed by the cultural, social, political, economic, and historical realities of this time and place. But it truly is the same spiritual tradition, watered by the same theological thought and liturgical practices, given new life in their cultivation.

While new ministries and churches will spring up from the fertile ground, there is also some pruning and weeding which must be done in our existing churches. Just as we don't often see the dust in our homes until we have company, we might not see the dead or dying shoots which are sucking resources from otherwise lively churches. When we trim them, we trust that their death will fertilize the soil for something else to grow, and direct resources for flourishing and opportunities for growth to the rest of the living plant. Here is the good news! Life is awaiting you, but there might be some death which is mixed up in that pursuit of life. We are resurrection people and trust that the fruit of death is life. On this side of eternity, that process often looks like growth.

Finally, there are death dealing forces in the gardens of our churches which must be uprooted for the flourishing of all people. Many if not all of the young adults we interviewed could speak of an experience of crisis or deep pain inflicted or facilitated by the church. I hope that breaks your heart. It breaks mine. When we know this, when we hear this, we are called to reflect on the theologies and structures and cultures of our communities, institutions, and leadership. What is going on in our church communities, that the faith passed on to young people was not a sufficient

² Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 3-28.

or strong enough force to uphold them in emerging adulthood? What does it say about our theology when young people who have loved the church are not welcome there; have been kicked out? Those who have experienced this rejection and pain, understandably, may not decide to sit under our tree ever again, a fact which will hopefully spurn churches on toward self-evaluation, repentance, restoration, and growth.



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