



## **Faithful Innovation: Forget, Borrow, Learn- insight from *The Agile Church***

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Rev. Ann Gibbs

Tod Bolsinger writes in *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*: “Today’s leaders are facing complex challenges that have no clear-cut solutions. These solutions are more systemic in nature and require broad, widespread learning...Even more complicated, these problems are often the results of yesterday’s solutions. They are what Ron Heifetz calls ‘adaptive challenges...Adaptive challenges arise when the world around us has changed but we continue to live on the successes of the past.” (p.19)

Dwight Zscheile is the Vice President of Innovation and Professor of Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary; he is also the author of *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*. When it comes to embracing our adaptive capacities as the church Zscheile says we need to *forget, borrow, and learn* in what he calls organizing for innovation. Forgetting is “letting go of the assumptions, mindsets, and biases that dominate the status quo in the established organization...It is not easy to do because organizations tend to be designed for ongoing operations, not innovation.” (p.115) These ongoing operations are what the church believes have led it to success in the past and they are what the existing members expect to be done well, but in a changing climate “new forms of organizational life and practice, new competencies are typically required...Without releasing some of these established assumptions, perspectives, patterns, and habits,” (ibid) adaptive innovation is impossible. Borrowing refers to the need to utilize existing resources whether funding, people, facilities, community connections, or other assets for the purpose of innovation. “The blessing of innovating within an established organization is that you aren’t starting from scratch...(But) it is easy for people in the established organization to be suspicious of resources being dedicated to something that might seem unfamiliar or threatening to them. In times of hardship, those resources can be withdrawn in a posture of hunkering down—at precisely the moment in which the innovation offers the only promise of a way forward into the future... For churches this opens up great opportunities for long standing values and commitments to be recast in ways that authorize the innovation and change.” (p.115) Learning is “about innovating our way into solutions through small experiments in a process of iteration, or repeated trial and failure” (p, 60) in what Zscheile calls “Action learning”. This involves an ongoing process of listening, assessing, discerning, and living into faithful actions. “There must be regular cycles, practices, and spaces for action-reflection, which means convening conversations about what the Spirit seems to be leading the church to try, acting upon that discernment, and then coming together to discuss what went well and what we would do differently next time...Action learning is how adults learn best—trying things out and then talking about what happened. We behave our way into new ways of seeing and being.” (pp. 117-118)

Embracing a culture of experimentation is the focus of Dwight Zscheile’s ministry. As a former congregational leader and co-developer of Faith+Lead (<https://faithlead.org/>), a church ministry innovation hub, he knows what it is to live into innovation. His approach of empowering and equipping church members as disciples of Jesus Christ is important to breaking down the barriers created by outdated structures. When Zscheile speaks about action learning, he does so not only from the practical perspective of the need for adaptation to a new reality, but also, as one critically and theologically engaged in formation of disciples of Jesus Christ. “For, to be a disciple of Jesus is to be a student, learner or apprentice in a community of mutual growth in love. It means using all the spiritual gifts with which God has equipped us.” (p.10)

As you consider your ministry, the gifts God has given you to use for the building up the church (the body of Christ in the world), and the ministry of your congregation, what do you need to forget, borrow, and learn? How might God be calling you into faithful innovation?