

Reimagining how we reimagine church

We need to end our obsession with novelty and corporate jargon.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [July 2023](#) issue



?(Illustration by Daria Kirpach)

*We need to reimagine church.* Heard that sentence before? Of course you have. It's the theme (and sometimes the title) of various conferences, books, and even congregations throughout the nation. As a resurrection people—one pointing toward a Jesus we cannot see and hoping to build a world that is not and perhaps has never been—our ability to imagine and reimagine is a critical part of our faith. It is how we respond to the harsh and undesirable things of life.

Besides, all the great innovations that have blessed our society were born out of a sense that there was “something more than this.” (Well, not penicillin. That was a complete accident. And Post-it notes and Velcro. But you get my point.)

Imagination is a good thing, one *necessary* for the life of faith. The ability to hope beyond reality—indeed, the tenacity to do such a thing—is the stuff of miracles.

A question, then. If constant (re)imagining is so critical to our faith, why are we so bad at it?

“Y’all be like ‘reimagine church,’” tweeted pastor Solomon Missouri in April, “and it’s just church but with skinny jeans.” If the challenge of church innovation were a six-word story, “it’s just church with skinny jeans” would take the podium. Because yes, the church is a mess and we need to reimagine, quickly—but I think we also need to reimagine how we reimagine.

We need better language. We often use corporate buzzwords like innovation to describe the way forward. And so many of our faith-based conferences, programs, and books on “the next church” or “developing leaders” are essentially capitalist business philosophies with a touch of theology. This is where I admit I’ve benefited from such a leadership program my denomination provided. Still, the language and practices we use to think about what’s next or new are almost always translations of texts and practices that have values and ends vastly different from ours as people of faith.

To start with, what is this “new” thing we keep talking about? In the corporate world, innovation is defined by the ability to pivot and do a new thing, come what may. If I had a nickel for each time I’ve heard the Steve Jobs iPhone story in some faith setting to illustrate how the church needs to figure out what’s coming, I’d have enough to buy an iPhone. But what’s latent in Jobs’s philosophy is the idea that things and people are only as valuable as the profit they create for us, and when they no longer do such a thing—gone.

Even the best translation of this into the faith world is dangerous. Do we really want our pastors cutting programs or rituals with this in mind? Should Christian traditions that do communion every week stop because “it’s boring”? Is our problem really that we haven’t innovated enough or that we haven’t innovated the right way?

Like many people reading this, I desperately want to belong to a church that is lovingly shaping the world around the ethics of Jesus of Nazareth. But I don't want to go about it in ways that Apple would approve of but Jesus would not. We've already lost so many people—and their stories and art—in our anxious pursuit of the new. And what has been the result? Worship services look mostly the same, leadership structures are the same, and theologies that alienate people remain intact. People who feel ignored, unheard, or commodified have other places they can go now, and the liberation theologians who represent many of those voices serve as a faithful response both to injustice in the world and to church settings that increasingly employ corporate and dehumanizing practices.

We talk about entering broken communities with the love of God, but we don't always check ourselves on that word *broken* or on whether our presence will further exacerbate the gentrification of such places. We talk about wisdom we bring in or need to find but less about the wisdom people already have. We need new language and new texts to guide us.

We need Stephen Lewis and Kimberly Daniel, whose *A Way Out of No Way: An Approach to Christian Innovation* (2022) describes a method that is attentive to people and frames innovation in a way that isn't obsessed with the new but instead seeks out the *right* thing. No cookie-cutter solutions but rather deep listening, reflection, truth telling, and collaboration.

The truth is that most of our traditions need to stop doing something we've been doing forever before we even begin to think about doing something new. This is why so many gender- and sexuality-affirming churches appear to be cutting-edge or radical. They are, but not by doing something unheard of; they are simply looking at what is or used to be and deciding they can't do that anymore. They aren't installing a new door; they're taking the chains off the old one.

Maybe reimagining means a new process for your ministry, not some new gadget that will help you connect with Gen Z. Because I promise you: young people see right through all our hip church shenanigans.

Maybe the answer isn't a new thing but a new way, one that invites us to mine deep into our tradition and beyond to find the faithful way forward—what's called *sankofa* in West African religious practice.

Maybe we'll actually listen to Jesus and stop worrying, as worrying causes institutions to do careless things instead of faithful things.

Maybe that's what will guide us—faithfulness—and we'll have to listen beyond what the corporate world has for us to actually be the church.

Imagine that.