

Dwight Zscheile, Michael Binder and Tessa Pinkstaff. *Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023. 162 pages. \$16.99.

For any church leader, lay or ordained, who is navigating new ways of being the church, this book is a great resource. With a blend of biblical insights, practical advice, and real-world examples, this book not only inspires but also equips leaders to lead with purpose and authenticity in their communities and beyond. Experienced leaders or those just beginning their journey will find an exploration of what it means to lead in the light of faith.

The authors describe faithful innovation as “the process of learning new ways to embody Christian identity and purpose in a changing cultural context. It is about rediscovering how to be the church in the 21st century and reconnecting with God, one another, and neighbors” (4). The biblical foundation is laid early and supports the discussion throughout the book. The authors develop the themes of the book based on the narrative in Acts 16:6-15 that tells of Paul and his companions following the leading of the Holy Spirit and finding themselves outside of the city walls at a women’s prayer group where they meet Lydia. This biblical narrative tells of people following the lead of the Holy Spirit which is not the same as maintaining the institution of the church. As culture shifts and institutional loyalty dwindles, the church must ensure that they are following the Holy Spirit rather than trying to “fix” or maintain an institution.

Each chapter includes examples and anecdotes of situations that are familiar to many people and churches. This helps the reader to make practical sense of what is explained in each chapter. Chapters two, three, and four look specifically at the three core practices that the authors are suggesting for leaders. The core practices described are listen, act, and share.

Chapter two describes the practice of listening. Leaders are encouraged to actively listen to God, others in their faith community and neighbors in the larger community. Again, the authors give practical steps on how to achieve this goal. Three practices to enhance listening are described in detail. Those practices include Dwelling in the Word, Spiritual Journey Conversations, and Prayer Walks. In this stage of the process, the participants seek to really listen so that they might move to the next step.

Chapter three is act. This is the second practice explained. Here the authors describe what they call action learning experiments. Based on the discernment that comes from listening, action should then be taken. The action learning experiments are to be simple, repeatable, and affordable. The less elaborate and expensive the more likely they are to be accepted by the broader congregation and can be repeated. The action learning experiments are meant to engage the community in new ways so that relationships can form as the congregation sees how God is at work in the world around them.

Chapter four is share. This is the third practice. The authors explain that sharing what has happened in the listening and action phases is important to energize people and create transformational change. Sharing is not something that is done once like a report on the activity. Sharing is to be done often and in different ways to different audiences. Sharing reflects on what has happened, allows people to share their experiences, and it is an opportunity to name how God might be inviting others into the work God is doing.

These three practices of listen, act, and share are the foundation of faithful innovation which the authors are careful to state is a way of living and not another program to enact. They help the church to discover new ways of being the church which is important in a time of institutional decline. It also helps the church to move away from the idea that church needs to be

fixed and into the space of following the leading of the Holy Spirit. The purpose is to ensure that God is at the center of the church and all that the church does.

While the book provides a solid framework for church leaders with practical strategies and biblical insights, it could benefit from deeper exploration of the challenges that leaders may face when implementing these practices in diverse or even resistant congregational contexts. Many of the churches in greatest need of being revitalized are change averse, making this shift more difficult. Additionally, while the authors do not consider this to be another program, it should be acknowledged that moving any church in a completely different direction takes more time and intentionality than creating another program. This is a significant shift for a church to make.

Overall, this book is great resource for anyone in denominational leadership. During a challenging season for many churches, these strategies and practices inspire a deeper understanding of the spiritual and relational dynamics at play within congregations.

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