

# **The complexity of ecclesial innovation**

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## **Introduction**

Australian Christians are endeavouring to develop more contextual and diverse expressions of church in an increasingly dynamic society. This wave of creativity echoes an earlier surge that occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s, so much for the saying, 'lightning never strikes twice.' While the earlier wave failed to engage denominations, the current wave is enjoying widespread denominational support yet it is also in acute danger of disappearing. Why is this so?

My research examined the experience of innovation in three denominations as each attempted to foster the development of missional communities. It consisted of 55 interviews with denominational executives, advocates and practitioners in the Anglican Uniting and Churches of Christ. This paper contends that the inability of Australian denominations to manage the complexity of innovation - culturally, organizationally and above all theologically – has contributed to the failure of one and potentially two missional movements. This paper begins by introducing the concept of innovation. It then surveys the formation of two movements, both of which remain largely overlooked in Australian religious history. It then introduces the concept of complexity for understanding innovation as a lens through which the rise and fall of these movements might be understood. Finally, the key findings of my study are presented. Denominations can develop cultures of innovation but the process is by no means assured give the parlous state of many denominations.

## **1. Innovation**

Innovation is a confusing phenomenon central to contemporary western life. It is confusing because of its semantic slipperiness. At a popular level, this term is used to describe services, products or processes that are new, different or better than those that exist already. At a technical level, the concept describes the means by which people in social systems develop productive technologies that apply knowledge to resolving needs in more efficient or effective ways. Confusion grows because of the way it is used by business and government systems to improve productivity. Such efforts typically trumpet the benefits while downplaying any negative implications and impact on individuals and social systems. Consequently, many view the term as little more than a

weasel word used by those attempting to justify something as self-evidently desirable or unquestionably superior simply because anything new is inherently better than anything old (Watson, 2004, p. 198).

Our understanding of innovation as a phenomenon for improving productivity has grown markedly in recent decades. Initially, the concept was associated with creativity because of the way the economist Joseph Schumpeter studied the personal behavior and characteristics of entrepreneurs during the 1930s. Innovation from this perspective was a black box, a mysterious and irreproducible that characterized the spirit of a few bold and enterprising individuals. Through the 1960s and 1970s, management theorists used the concept to understand and improve the processes associated with industrial manufacturing. From this perspective, the concept appeared as a linear process of development that took any new product or service from the drawing board to the boardroom and finally showroom floor. Through the 1980s and 1990s, sociologists began to explore its social dynamics and reality of resistance to new ideas, products and practices. During the 2000s, the concept was viewed through the experience of information technology especially its capacity to create massive improvements to productivity while disrupting the power of dominant firms while changing social systems and personal behavior.

Perceptions about innovation have been profoundly influenced by the context in which the phenomenon has been studied. For the most part, the experience of innovation in the social sector, especially in churches, has been overlooked. Furthermore, many have actively resisted the incursion of management insights into ecclesial life believing that such rationalistic approaches undermine the church's distinctive identity and vocation as God's people who participate in God's mission. Other leaders in the church have embraced innovation in an effort to improve denominational effectiveness and efficiency for mission, especially evangelistic engagement. Such efforts have occurred because of changing patterns of religious identification and participation.

While many sociologists have interpreted declining affiliation as an inevitable consequence of secularization, many clergy have sought attempt to develop better strategies, methods and processes for mission. Most recently, Australian denominations have sought to embrace fresh expressions of church. Fresh expressions of church are forms of ecclesial life designed for people who live in a changing culture but who are not part of any ecclesial community. They are literally communities designed to enable people who are not Christian and who do not belong to the church to meet Christ, develop faith and enter into a life of discipleship that is both personally transforming

and socially enriching. Such a movement is reshaping perceptions of ecclesial innovation in both helpful and unhelpful ways.

Fresh expressions of church are forms of innovation that are both discontinuous for ecclesial life and hopefully disruptive for the world. Fresh expressions are discontinuous because they create forms of community life and worship that are new and different to existing denominational forms. Many battles have been fought over whether such forms conform to denominational expectations about ecclesial life. Proponents have argued that while the appearance of such forms are different nevertheless the essence or substance of ecclesial life is preserved in their efforts to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, nurture new believers, meet social needs, address social injustice and seek the renewal of creation. Many hope that such forms will also disrupt the dominance of secularisation. As people in a changing culture have fewer connections with and diminished interest in traditional forms of ecclesial life, these new and culturally appropriate forms allow such people to encounter the life changing power of Christ within the context of their own cultural horizons. Consequently, the hope is that fresh expressions of church will not only see participation in God's mission expand but denominational life renewed, even if the forms and participation look markedly different from much that has gone before. At the same time, leaders risk identifying innovation with this form so completely that the phenomenon's presence and relevance to the development of different strategies, methods and programs goes unrecognized.

## **2. Mustard seeds**

Australian religious life has changed markedly since the 1960s. The historians and sociologists who tell this story often focus on large institutions and broad cultural trends like ecumenism, secularization and conflict. The conversation about mission has focused on the prominent issues concerning indigenous peoples and the inclusion of minorities. Within such narratives, scholars often overlook the dynamic nature of evangelism and those who sit uncomfortably within these institutional parameters. Two movements committed to the formation of appropriate Christian communities in the Australian context have emerged. Their experience of growth and decline highlights the difficulty that Australian denominations have with managing innovation's complexity.

The first movement stirred during the 1960s and 1970s as an effort to develop an authentically Australian Christianity. Some attempted to free Christianity from restrictive British and European forms. Others attempted to grow new

styles of Christian communities in cities characterized by blue-collar indifference, intensifying secularism and multiculturalism. Internationally, Tom Sine (1981, p. 20) identified these churches as mustard seeds because they appeared 'insignificant, invisible and incomprehensible,' especially to those deeply acculturated in conventional ecclesial forms. Sine observed how such groups sought to engage with people in secular culture by offering an alternative lifestyle, a broad vision of vocation that rejected the secular/religious dichotomy, creative forms of community and valued the majority world.

The journalist David Millikan and Peter Kaldor, an urban planner, charted some of this movement's Australian contours. Millikan (1981, p. 91) sensed that while Australia had not shown 'the same talent for innovation in religion' as it had in other fields, things had begun to change. House churches, communities of social concern (like John Smith's God Squad), ocker evangelists and Christian rock 'n' roll characterized this attempt to take evangelism deeper than outreach. However, Millikan observed that 'these initiatives have not been well received within the conservative church structures' which were otherwise 'understaffed, overworked and constrained by financial difficulties' (Millikan, 1981, p. 104). Kaldor (Kaldor, Bowie, & Farquhar-Nicol, 1985; Kaldor & Kaldor, 1988) attempted to redress this problem. He (Kaldor & Kaldor, 1988, p. 93) wanted Australian denominations to understand the principles for engaging with under-represented sub-cultures and generational groups. Yet he also sensed a lack of nerve for deep evangelism along with a shallow understanding of contextualization and inadequate supportive systems (Kaldor & Kaldor, 1988, pp. 185-192).

It is not presently possible to estimate the size, diversity, scope, denominational influence and long-term impact of this initial movement. Although Kaldor would develop a comprehensive system quantifying congregational life, little was done to measure or monitor such groups. Some like God Squad and the Wayside Chapel persevered. Other leaders like Athol Gill influenced a new generation of leaders through pastoral education. The fate of most of these groups remains known only to those involved. Such groups diminished and disappeared for a variety of cultural, organizational and theological reasons. Culturally, many groups operated outside denominational structures leaving them organizationally vulnerable, especially around succession. Theologically, assumptions around conventional congregational life remained unchanged in most denominations. Indeed, such assumptions only grew stronger as church growth, health and planting movements caught denominational attention during the 1980s and 1990s.

### **3. The missional movement**

The second or missional church movement stirred during the late 1990s. In some respects, the initiatives spawned by this movement closely resembled its predecessor although the emphasis was now firmly placed on engaging with non-Christians living in changing, post-modern or post-Christian culture. Key figures in this movement were critical of the status quo, which was likened to Christendom, arguing that post-Christendom demanded a new missional approach (Frost & Hirsch, 2003). While its predecessor operated beyond denominational institutions, this movement often operated often within such frameworks and its proponents actively sought to rework many denominational assumptions (Heath & Duggins, 2014).

Taxonomies and key features associated with movement vary but each is endeavouring to work more effectively with the opportunities and challenges associated with a changing culture (Flory & Miller, 2008; Gibbs & Bolger, 2005; McKnight, 2007; Sine, 2008). The emerging or emergent stream is most interested in the faith/post-modernity dynamic and often emphasizes the need for innovation and exploration most explicitly. Others are more confessional, resisting the post-modern push yet intent on restating classic reformed thinking within hipster culture (DeYoung & Kluck, 2008). Some are intentionally cross-cultural while others firmly emphasize intentional community. Although diverse in its expressions, the movement generally emphasizes the importance of hospitality, community and creativity while working out of overwhelming need to take Christianity beyond the conventional congregational frameworks.

While its predecessor worked largely by intuition the new movement drew widely from contemporary missiology to leadership and management theory. This new movement emphasized the need for local and holistic mission (Cray et al., 2004; Frost & Hirsch, 2003, pp. 11-12) thereby sidestepping its predecessor's fixation with broad nationalistic and even stereotypical categories and the perennial but self-defeating debate about the priority of proclamation or social action. It strongly emphasized a team-based approach to leadership grounded in individual transformation and collaboration, long a cornerstone of mainstream leadership theory (Quinn, 1996). It was also highly networked not only were key proponents circulating between Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, the US and Canada but the development of Christian festivals and the internet enabled an unprecedented level of engagement.

The movement also absorbed and applied many core insights from innovation theory, often uncritically so (Hirsch, 2006; Hirsch & Catchim, 2012; Hirsch & Ferguson, 2011; Moynagh, 2004; Moynagh & Harrold, 2012). Much of our

understanding of innovation derives from industrial manufacturing and information technology, both of which are shaped by their industrial values and concerns. Such thinking was applied readily to the formation of new faith communities. It gave leaders practical strategies to address resistance (Corney, 2000) and emboldened many to 'surf the edge of chaos' in order to find fresh solutions to existing problems (Cray et al., 2004; Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 2000). A few self-confidently asserted that their 'disruptive' work would not only revitalize Christianity but bury modernist ecclesial assumptions and forms (Langmead, 2005).

Once again, determining the size, diversity, scope, denominational influence and long-term impact of this new movement in Australia is difficult to assess. Internationally, the movement has grown strongly in the UK and the US. In Britain, the growth of fresh expressions has already made a notable statistical impact, albeit one so far incapable of offsetting inbuilt demographic decline (Voas et al., 2014). In the US, although the movement expressly seeks to engage with those leaving mainstream churches and several large networks have since emerged. Unfortunately, there is yet too little research that quantifies its impact or effectiveness. Australian efforts to measure it have proven unsuccessful, not least because they often reject such practices as modernist. Some key groups like the Forge Missional Training Network and Solace have passed away. Curiously, while interest and energy for missional endeavours appears to have sagged in Sydney and Melbourne, others in Brisbane and Adelaide have picked up the baton. Many denominations reworked key organizational features to allow space for new groups to emerge. Baptists, the Churches of Christ, the Uniting Church, Lutherans and Anglicans all reviewed institutional rules in the expectation that a new dawn of regulatory freedom would result in an expansion of new missional communities – only it didn't happen.

#### **4. Innovation at the edge**

Why did so few missional communities emerge? The lack of talent and finances in denominations that are aging and downsizing were most readily cited. Yet, proponents of the movement and denominational leaders alike underestimated and inadequately addressed innovation's complexity.

Complexity is a concept developed by management specialists concerning the nature of problems and the strategies organizations use to resolve them (Conklin, 2005; Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Riel, 2009; Snowden & Boone, 2007). Theorists initially spoke of tame and wicked problems (Churchman,

1967). Tame or simple problems can be resolved using a linear process built on causality. By contrast, wicked problems are dynamic because solutions are not only perception dependent but also the problem changes with each action. Obesity and climate change are well-recognized complex problems.

Innovation by its nature is a complex problem. The development of any new product, process or service occurs in a dynamic social environment and subject to webs of interaction between users and developers at every stage. The most recent thinking about innovation emphasizes that it works as ecological system often through a multifaceted design process (Gallouj & Djellal, 2010; Goldstein, Hazy, & Lichtenstein, 2010; Martin, 2009). Even when products are developed, users must find ways to accommodate them within pre-existing cultural and social norms that are subsequently impacted by the innovation's acceptance or rejection. This ecological dimension encouraged some to view it through the lens of emergence whereby new thinking, forms and strategies through effective networking, open experimentation and collaborative partnerships (Holland, 2000; Johnson, 2002).

Even when denominational leaders emphasize the importance of innovation, few leaders understand its dynamics or implications for ecclesial life. My study highlighted how, as with most complex problems, that cultural, organizational and theological dimensions interacted to reinforce feedback that deterred participation.

Many Australian denominations approached the development of missional initiatives as if it were a relatively simple problem of talent and money. The assumption was that because religious movements have occurred historically at the edge of institutions, among motivated risk-takers (Pierson, 2008) that missional communities would form in the same way. Core institutions were still perceived to be at best resistant or at worst, recalcitrant and capable of distorting any innovation. On this basis, the lack of support and assistance was often viewed as beneficial thereby ensuring survival of the fittest. Denominations often tried their best, using programs, coaches and consultants to encourage initiatives yet no large-scale expansion of missional initiatives ever emerged. The key may yet lie with managing innovation's cultural, organizational and theological complexity more effectively.

## 5. Managing complexity

Although denominations have regularly voiced the need and support for missional initiatives, denominational engagement with innovation's dynamics are often superficial. The cultural, organizational and theological dimensions of innovation cannot be addressed in isolation from each other. Rather, they form an integrated system such that the neglect of any element will amplify negative feedback throughout. Unfortunately, many denominations are such loose networks of organisations and associations such that integrating leadership selection, training and congregational development is supremely difficult. Furthermore, many denominations have significantly diminished capacity to produce any resources internally and most depend on the marketplace, usually deriving material from the US or England. Nevertheless, a range of independent networks often exist in parallel to denominations with the capacity to amplify positive feedback and so build personal capacity and institutional strength if collaborative partnerships are formed.

Culture is perhaps the most significant challenge facing most denominations. Internal denominational culture was problematic in five key respects. First, internal ecclesial cultures often understood the challenge as external in the form of secularization associated with post-Christendom and generally tolerated how their cultures devalued and discouraged innovation, experimentation and change. Even when leaders affirmed innovation's importance, their behavior often undermined it in practice. Second, many practitioners were not merely young and inexperienced but the connections between these leaders were often weak and insubstantial. Third, many leaders polarized innovation and tradition, a pattern that often reinforced the movement's isolation and fragmentation. Fourth, denominations with limited resources often wanted 'winners' and easily overlooked those who didn't fit pre-existing expectations. Such limitations saw some increasingly embrace rigorous assessment procedures which invariably seemed to narrow the field further. The net result was that they often failed to consider how entrepreneurialism can and should be a widespread practice or how to foster such broad skills at a congregational level. Finally, many denominations, at least in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, are not used to collaborating with each other for the sake of developing new missional initiatives.

Practitioners, advocates and executives were often defeated by their denomination's organizational complexity in several ways. First, the Byzantine complexity of denominational expectations, programs and requirements left many leaders unsure of program assistance available at a denominational level or how to optimize their application for it. This left many feeling

demoralized and unsupported, especially when leaders vocalized the need for missional initiatives but organizational grants go elsewhere. Second, denominations are preoccupied with the low productivity of existing congregations and have done little to address the issue of institution building and leadership development. Although denominations employ evangelism consultants, most spend their time working with remedial congregations. While helpful, too little energy is allocated to new approaches, which are even more resource intensive. Third, denominations attempted to retool existing institutions without necessarily considering the formation of new institutions, such as the UK based Centre for Pioneer Learning. Proponents often undermined this process of institutional development by presuming that it would happen spontaneously as people engaged in mission (Brewin, 2004) while often being deeply suspicious of any institutionalization. Fourth, while denominational processes were notionally open to new forms of church, existing forms and practices were constantly privileged and so no adequate training system has formed. Forge proved useful as did Church Army's work but both groups collapsed financially. Although independent Networks like the Acts 29 inspired Geneva Push provide denominations with a host of services, they generally treat it as the domain for independent professionals rather than for integrated amateurs within congregational systems. Finally, leaders were often discouraged because positions for missional leaders were so poorly resourced and recognized that many returned to conventional ministry or became increasingly frustrated with ecclesial systems that were unresponsive to their needs or interests.

Leaders confronted theological complexity in two ways. First, they need resources and practices designed to help people in contexts where conventional Christianity is neither valued nor respected. Pursuing such contacts is time intensive and practitioners often sacrificed denominational relationships in the process. Furthermore, there appeared to be too little infrastructure to manage the knowledge emerging from efforts at contemporary contextualization. While websites have proven helpful in the past, they are intensive to develop and not necessarily well utilized as a result. Although stories are often helpful, Australia lacks the capacity to produce and gather such stories, which in the UK is done by the Sheffield Centre. Second, leaders lived within systems characterized by theological contest and conflict. The movement is but one of at least four major theological paradigms competing for denominational influence and resources. These paradigms are deeply embedded within denominational organizations leaving little room or sympathy for new approaches. The close identification of innovation with the missional paradigm means that practitioners of other paradigms do not necessarily recognize how the same phenomenon

influences the development of their own goals, strategies, programs and practices. With no obvious or evident process for managing knowledge development, missional insights appeared to remain locked at a local level and unavailable to others within their denominational systems. As the Australian marketplace appeared small and highly fragmented, leaders are dependent on US and English resources as these are the most readily available.

## **Conclusion**

Innovation is a complex task. Denominational life appeared excessively concerned with short-term horizons, linear approaches to strategic planning and a preference for easily adapted solutions. Unfortunately, few systems had the wherewithal to make innovation easier for their leaders. Denominational systems lacked not only the institutional structures to facilitate innovation but the culture to sustain it. Consequently, when results proved disappointing rather than working through the problems identified by the innovation processes, priorities shifted quickly, programs were wound up, staff were redeployed and practitioners were left with very little compared to level of sacrifice demanded by the task.

In many respects, denominations need better collaborative approaches whereby groups can develop their own systems by networking with those pursuing paradigmatic alternatives. The temptation is for denominational leaders to resort to authority in an effort to control the competitiveness and discord produced by innovation. A better approach might be to harness or channel such competitiveness through collaboration. It is unfortunate that Australian interest in this second movement is waning because of its complexity. With so little energy left in the systems, the emergence of a third missional movement seems unlikely. Still, many would have not expected the dowdy and intransigent Church of England to play such a leadership drawing many people different denominations across Europe to learn and work together. Australian denomination might offer a similar surprise provided they begin to address innovation's complexity.

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