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## Reflections on Faithful Innovation in the City of Saint Francis: ICEF Conference Report

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### Abstract

The annual meeting of the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) took place in July 2023 in the San Francisco Bay Area of the United States. Participants from the United States, Europe, South Africa and Australia gathered to share research around the theme “faithful innovation” and to reflect together on the challenges and possibilities for cultivating innovative missional ministries. This paper reflects upon two significant themes from the consultation: (1) clarifying the tensions between innovation and Christian faith, and (2) reflecting upon the ecological conditions that cultivate room for innovation that is faithful, and expressions of the faith that are innovative.

**Keywords:** International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures, Faithful innovation, Creativity, San Francisco Bay Area

Above a stairway overlooking Frida Kahlo Avenue in San Francisco, a statue of Saint Francis stands, arms outstretched to welcome the city, body shaped like a cross, beatific eyes peeking out under a monk’s hood. The statue was made by the renowned artist Benito Bufano from over a thousand firearms willingly surrendered after spate of violence in the late 1960s. On the cloak of St Francis, a mosaic of assassinated public leaders – John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Abraham Lincoln – witness to the possibilities and impossibilities of peace in violent culture. Each figure offered hope, and each figure was tragically gunned down. But as Bufano knew, weapons meant to take life can be refashioned into something beautiful. And now St Francis, he of “all creatures of our God and king”, whose gentle care for the vulnerable and life of intentional poverty inspired the faithful across medieval Europe, is now perched on the lawn of the City College of San Francisco, offering a sign of peace.

Known for its social, technological and economic innovations, San Francisco is not thought of as particularly religious. But it has been the site of a peculiar kind

of American religious innovation, often generating new activity that migrates elsewhere, such as the Jesus People of the 1970s or the adventurous ecumenism of the Consultation on Church Union in the 1960s or the interreligious cooperation of the 2000s. But these religious movements seem to float above the deep undercurrents of privatized spirituality and fierce independence that have come to characterize the Bay Area. For these reasons, San Francisco focuses the various challenges of missional ministry in a post-Christian context into the question of *faithful* innovation. In a context known for innovation, the modifier *faithful* does significant work. How might Christian communities innovate in ways that are faithful to the gospel? How might such innovations be plausible within the cultural soil from which they emerge, and thus be faithful to a particular place and a time? How, in other words, can congregations in a Post-Christian context bear witness like “St Francis of the Guns”, by reshaping cultural materials of time and place to be a sign (and, in the words of Newbigin, instrument and foretaste) of God’s Reign?

The International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) gathered scholars, pastors and judicatory leaders from the United States, Europe, South Africa and Australia in the Bay Area during a week in July 2023 to consider the theoretical, theological and practical dimensions of faithful innovation for post-Christian and post-Christendom contexts. The ICEF is an invitation-only theological learning community from four different continents who meet annually to work together on questions of Christian faith and practice in post-Christendom and post-Christian contexts. Seeking to share wisdom across cultural contexts, each consultation offers opportunity for members to share research around the given topic. Seeking to ground the conversation in the soil where the consultation is taking place, each gathering has an “open day” where local pastors and judicatory leaders join in the proceedings. And finally, because God’s mission is always located in a place and attentive to the particularities of people and culture, each gathering situates the conversation within the missional questions of the context where the consultation meets.

In San Francisco in 2023, the consultation focused on the question of faithful innovation, working with, and learning from, the Episcopal Diocese of San Francisco during the “open day” and sharing research focused on that theme the other days. Serving as both muse and case study, the Bay Area guided and grounded our conversation, causing us to interrogate the two terms and see them in new light. What follows is a brief account of faithful innovation, drawn from the soil of Menlo Park and viewed from American, European, South African and Australian vantage points.

## Finding the *Faith* in “Faithful Innovation”?

In some ways, we remain puzzled thirty years after Lesslie Newbigin inquired about the conditions of possibility for a renewed missionary encounter with the West.

On the one hand, “the West” is too broad to include the different manifestations of post-Christendom in different regions of the United States, or between European state-churches, or in post-apartheid South Africa and rapidly secularizing Australia. On the other hand, the rapid pace of social and cultural change makes the question a moving target in each of our contexts. As Newbigin suggested many years ago in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, a gospel-encounter in the modern/post-modern West is not simply a challenge of rhetoric or theological imagination, but an invitation for Christian communities to witness to the gospel in public and plausible ways (1989). In many judicatories, this task falls to new faith communities and experimental ministries in hope that a mixed ecology of new and traditional ministries might engage both emerging and legacy generations. But rather than a mixed ecology, we too often end up with a division of labour, where new faith communities are expected to innovate, and legacy congregations seek to protect the tradition. Innovation and faithfulness are treated like competitors that must be managed rather than a necessary feature of gospel ministry. Because, as Andrew Walls says, there never has been nor will there be a society which can “absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system”, faithfulness to the gospel necessarily makes us pilgrims, makes us odd and at times uncomfortable in our cultural setting (1996: 8). If we are faithful to the word of Christ among us, even our legacy congregations will innovate with elements of its traditional inheritance as a matter of attention to this gospel-culture dynamic. Similarly, the gospel constrains and redirects our quest for innovation, giving plausible Christian witness a bifocal lens. We seek faithfulness to the gospel itself and also the socio-cultural locale.

Faithful innovation, we suggest, is the gospel-work of the whole church. There is neither a status we can hold onto that says “faithful” nor an end we can claim that says “innovation”, there is only the invitation to join with the uncertain and messy work of cultivating Christian community at this time and place, faithful to both God and neighbour, to tradition and God’s future. Two papers from our gathering instantiate this approach, showing how church systems might faithfully innovate as part of missional discernment.

Nelus Niemandt, in his role at Huguenote College in South Africa, has recognized the need to create institutional spaces for creativity, innovation and experimentation. Such institutional spaces need to be mission-aligned and integrative, so that groups can work across disciplines on an issue or question related to the mission and context of the institution. In the case of Huguenote College, Niemandt has created a School for Social Innovation, which sits between its theological and social work faculties, creating room for theologically-informed projects in community-building for the improvement of society. While a new and innovative structure for the school, it emerges from a contextual assessment of its tradition and history. An innovation itself, the School of Social Innovation exists to help others do the same by helping

students and social entrepreneurs to consider their faith, values and theology in relationship to pressing social issues and structural inequalities. Improvising with existing materials and deeply attentive to the challenges of one's locale, faithful innovation opens itself to a future in God, to God's future. As such, it is *faithful* innovation and also faithful *innovation*.

We need more than institutional space for innovation, however. Popular discourse regarding missional innovation tends to put a term like "creativity" on a pedestal, making innovation an end in itself. As Andrew Root (2022) shows, innovation and creativity make poor ends for the church. In a paper presented at the consultation, Dorte Kappelgaard reflected upon her work with congregations in Denmark and Norway, exploring how a theology of creation and a Christian aesthetics can reframe the pursuit of innovation from a never-ending quest to forge "the new" to an act of surrender to the mission of God.

Creativity, Kappelgaard argues, should be understood in relationship to a theology of creation, rooted in the biblical narrative of God as creator and human beings as created in God's image. In the book of Genesis, the Spirit of God soars above the dark void, seeing and imagining possibility and bringing order out of chaos. God speaks "let there be light", and there is light. God creates the universe, the earth, nature, animals and human beings, and God blesses them all and sees them as good. Several voices in the early church tradition stress the creative movement of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: God is one who sends energies of love toward creation and who invites us into the Triune God's own creative dance of love and being (Fuhrmann 2011: 56–9). Human creativity participates in this movement of God, potentially taking part in the creative, life-giving movement of God's Spirit through the world. In this perspective, creativity is fundamentally about being human. Creativity reflects God's energies of love, moving from person to person, participating in God's creation and giving shape to one's local context. It should be a question of love, joy, even playfulness, taking the shape of church, searching to reach out towards the other in fresh, responsive ways.

In a Christian worldview, participating in God's creativity will always be flawed. It carries, as Winner notes, "characteristic damage" (2018). Even our most creative and hopeful acts will reflect selfish motives, fear, worry and/or pride. The church thus faces a choice regarding its own understanding of the human creature. In one approach, being human and being church can be envisioned as competing goods, turning the other into an object for use, consumption, or success. But within another approach, the other person is understood to be a living mystery, a potential co-creator in Christ for the sake of something much more beautiful and interesting than the story of one church.

In this second perspective, the world is full of possibility and longing, waiting to be released and for life to spring forth, partly in this time and age, partly in the world to

come. Understood in relationship to creativity, innovation is a form of self-forgetting, a people caught up in the creative dance of God and God's world. Like listening to music or viewing art, innovation as creativity reconfigures subjectivity, enabling one to be moved and transformed as an actor. This is what the German Hartmut Rosa describes as resonance between the subject and the world (2016: 298).

Kappelgaard argues that there is a close relationship between such theological approaches to creativity and theological aesthetics. Among many philosophical definitions of beauty, one is that which holds a value in itself (Scruton 2009: 26). In the Genesis narrative, the goodness of God's creation is not related to its instrumental value, but rather to its value in itself, a creature of God. In the light of the above, creation holds an inner beauty that God recognizes. The theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that without sensitivity towards beauty, we lose our ability to love (1982, 1: 18). The world was created out of love, just as it is the beauty of God's creation that makes us love it. Creativity – understood as participation in the creative love of God – cultivates spaces, communities, programs, art and music which hold a sense of beauty, of value in themselves, and call for us to love.

In her work with congregations, Kappelgaard draws from such theories of creativity and beauty to help congregations envision innovation as an open-ended act of communal creativity and exploration in the hope for beauty to appear, without being able to evoke or control it. In listening to God, to each other and to the local context, the church is on a constant, dynamic journey of looking for the deeper beauty, which calls for us to love the other. Asking God to help us see the world with God's eyes, it is the beauty of a potential, a deep dark void in the local neighborhood that calls for us to get up and engage in a journey of creative exploration with the Spirit and the stranger.

This is not to say that tradition is set aside for the sake of the beautiful. Beauty is not in itself related to "the new". Tradition, both understood as that which we hold dear and as the meaning of Christian tradition, is connected to beauty in some form. It is through seeing the beauty of the faithfulness of those who have gathered, Sunday after Sunday over several decades, that we come to love tradition as beautiful. When listening to people's emotions and narratives connected to the church community or its rituals, we may sense a glimpse of this depth of richness and experience. This is often where the conversation begins, in celebrating the beauty of what is, as well as mourning the beauty of what is now only in the past. Recognizing the beauty of the present can help communities to explore new ways in which this beauty might spill over and bless the context in new forms. Being given a space and time to mourn the beauty of what used to be can set people on a journey towards travelling with a lighter rucksack, becoming open to that which may be coming toward them as potential new life. This is the eschatological aspect of creativity.

Innovation, so understood, calls us to repent of our tendency to objectify the other, turning them into a tool for our success or survival, either through sustaining the well-known or inventing the new. And, like Jesus calling out “repent and believe”, innovation also requires a posture of surrender to God, coupled with an openness to the community, the stranger, and that which might be surprising or unexpected. There might even be a call to look for the beauty in the process, approaching each formal meeting or each spontaneous conversation with a stranger as a place where the beauty of God is reflected in all its brokenness.

One could argue that this calls for a movement of surrender to God when we realize we have fallen short in imagination and hopefulness, in sensitivity to the beauty of the existing, in welcoming the stranger in courage, or in responding to the movement of the Spirit. But what types of places are people free for creativity and the embrace of beauty? What types of contexts are more likely to cultivate such practices?

## Faithful Innovation as an Ecological Challenge

As mentioned above, the proceedings of ICEF developed a view toward faithful innovation deeply connected to the locale in which the church or denomination operates. Faithful innovation exercises fidelity to the Christian gospel as well as those to whom God sends the Church. Such a dynamic cultivates creativity and the possibility of beauty, if the congregation can remain open to the new, the surprising, the unexpected, the possibility of guns melting into a sign of peace. Faithful innovation, then, considers the local wisdom of a place and seeks to support the people of faith. Faithful innovation requires and helps sustain a particular kind of social ecology, as demonstrated in the work of Hagley, Rohrer and Gehrling (2020), James (2017) and Benac (2020). It perhaps goes without saying, but it is within the thick web of connections shaped over time by individual relationships and institutional partnerships that new possibilities emerge. Faithful innovation both reflects an ecology of attentive discernment to the movement of God in our midst and also cultivates a social space within which such discernment can take place.

Given the fact that neither new experiments in missional church nor existing establishment congregations have a monopoly on either term – neither *faithful* nor *innovation* – we must imagine faithful innovation as an ecological orientation. We describe this as an orientation or capacity for drawing attention to the contemporary challenges that are present in existing ecclesial ecologies in ways that help the organization learn how the reordering and renegotiation of relationships creates opportunities for new possibilities. It is not up to heroic and visionary missionaries or social entrepreneurs to show the way for our congregations, but rather the task of the whole Church to create hospitable space for theological discernment and social innovation. To this end, we explored during the consultation three aspects of this

ecological orientation: the conditions for faithful innovation in an ecclesial ecology, the challenges before faithful innovation in an ecclesial ecology, and the cultivation of faithful innovation in an ecclesial ecology. This section will briefly detail each of these aspects.

## Conditions

Throughout the ICEF gathering, we observe five different conditions for an innovative ecosystem: connection, context, creativity, convening and contrast. Connection describes the need for thick bonds and healthy communication between individuals within faithful communities, existing and emerging experiments in the community or the larger denominational system, those who interpret and interrogate the tradition (the theological and practical resources from the past), and the Triune God. The relational properties of connection are equally important. For example, connection requires trust and often takes time. In so far as connection is condition for faithful innovation, it cannot always be measured on fixed timelines and predetermined outputs.

Second, context is an essential condition for faithful innovation. While the people of God have always been rooted in particular contexts, many of the most hopeful signs of faithful innovation are (re)turning to place and a more local faith. This is reflected in studies like Chris James's (2017) exploration of new faith communities in Seattle, where "neighbourhood incarnation" communities offered vital and timely reimagining of church life and ministry. So also, Doret Niemandt, in a paper presented at the consultation, studied online church ministries in South Africa during the COVID lockdowns. She offers a rich description of multi-layered contextual ministry, where both online worlds and embodied practices cultivate intertwined and contingent contexts within which innovative experiments in Christian community must take place.

Third, faithful innovation requires a culture that cultivates and gives permission for creativity. Creative ecosystems are not only restless with the status quo, but open to surprise and expectant of beauty in their life together. As mentioned in the previous section, the form of creativity that nourishes faithful innovation within an ecclesial ecology is sustained by hope; amid the many contemporary challenges that confront faith communities and faith leaders, hope stirs a form of creativity that innovates not from fear or anxiety, but from an orientation of offering. Ecosystems that innovate are characterized by this restlessness, hope, and openness to beauty, such that the work of faithful innovation simply bears witness to God's ongoing generosity by seeking to offer creative and compelling work, words, and wonder into the world.

Fourth, innovative ecosystems convene individuals and community for the sake of reflection, worship, and collective discernment. Representing more than a practice of gathering, convening is a form of individual and collective inquiry that orients

a collective in worship of God. To this end, the gathering of the ICEF purposefully convened scholars, practitioners and judicatory leaders through worship and across the silos and geographic divisions that can inhibit faithful innovation. Too often church systems fail to convene groups across difference for the sort of reflection, worship and discernment that deepens connection and fosters creativity. Fifth, innovative ecosystems tolerate and learn from unexpected and contrasting experiences. Too often, innovation is sacrificed at the altar of assimilation and sameness. We sacrifice innovation for a narrow understanding of faithful. As a condition for an innovative ecosystem, contrast – understood as space for difference – names the need for a holding environment in which various forms of contrast can become generative for faithful innovation rather than inhibiting it. In many contexts present at this the ICEF gathering, the seeds of faithful innovation emerged from the existence or experience of contrasting realities in some way. Scholars of leadership and innovation have described this phenomena in various ways (e.g., “liminality” [Carson, Fairhurst and Rooms 2021]; or “boundary zones” [Gunderson 2004]). Our description here draws attention to how polarized realities or experience have the capacity to draw into sharper contrast the particular work faithful innovation requires. For example, faithful innovation may require discerning how to curate new expressions while also discerning the role and legacy of what is inherited. Faithful innovation may require navigating the contexts between the need for organizational structure and the forms of transcendence that draws this work forward. It requires tending to the need for boundary-crossing connection as well as the forms of belonging that often emerge from separate communities. And faithful innovation requires cultivating a dynamic of sharing learning through the contrast of “Ressourcement” and “Aggiornamento” in the spirit of Vatican II. While the precise combination of conditions may vary, our work together drew attention to these five conditions for faithful innovation.

## Challenges

Nevertheless, barriers to faithful innovation exist. Even as an ecological orientation for faithful innovation draws attention to the abundance of resources and opportunities that exist, it also requires a somber assessment of the living system that surrounds existing and emerging experiments. Our work together drew attention to a constellation of related challenges. First, there is a need for space where existing ecclesial expression and new churches invite individuals and communities to explore faithful innovation. Amid the contemporary demands on religious leaders’ time, there may be a desire to explore faithful innovation, but there is a limited amount of time and creative energy. Moreover, existing educational pipelines do not always equip religious leaders with the skills and imagination to consider the process of



faithful innovation beyond a pragmatic calculus of survival. Second, faithful innovation requires a risk and willingness to step into the unknown, and many contemporary institutions, churches, governing bodies, and Christian communities simply lack what they need to take the first step. For participants drawn from the United States, competition leads to loneliness for pastors as well as congregations. Further, amid the generational transitions in wealth and giving practice, some communities may face financial challenges that can make the possibility of trying (and funding) something new a risk that is too much to take. In Europe, the parish structures suffers in its own way. While it helpfully indexes religious life to a particular locality, parishes are not always resourced with the personnel and capital faithful innovation requires. Third, relational, structural and institutional barriers can inhibit gathering and exploring across traditional and new expressions. While an ecological orientation toward faithful innovation invites individuals and communities to see the possibility that comes from these forms of encounters, seen and unseen barriers persist that discourage the process and can leave innovators isolated and working against formidable challenges.

## Cultivation

Finally, we want to conclude by exploring ways we may cultivate an ecological orientation for faithful innovation. Just as living ecologies require care in order to flourish, faithful innovation in and for the flourishing of our ecclesial ecologies requires purposeful cultivation. We identified three areas of work. First, there is a need for new meeting spaces that center the wisdom of local congregations and provide opportunities to collaborate and foster the resources (financial as well as relational) that nourish an orientation for faithful innovation. In so far as the work of the ICEF provides a test case, the work of this group over two decades has served as an incubator for experiments, a space to form new connections, and meeting place for friendships that span geographies. Second, the inevitable tensions and contrasts evoked by innovation are both vital to the ecclesial ecology but also require management. Without pressing the ecological metaphor too far, we will simply note that the flourishing environmental ecology includes members who do not always get along. While our work together wants to envision and anticipate the “kin-dom of God”, as Isasi-Diaz notes (2004), we also do not want to heedlessly diminish polarization. Rather, when differences are affirmed and connections strong, polarities can move groups toward discernment and offer surprising forms of community. Finally, there is a need for processes where insights, best practices, and learnings from one part of an ecclesial ecology can find their way back to members in other parts of the ecclesial community. As one participant noted, this can be represented by a figure eight movement that gives space for the best insights from two “poles” to migrate toward

common ground in a way that minimizes the contrasts that might come from two approaches. When cultivated and maintained over time, this cycle of information sharing creates an environment where we think faithful innovation can continue to form and flourish.

## An Invitation

Finally, in the spirit of our work together, we want to extend a humble invitation. The kind of imagination that resources and nourishes faithful innovation in and for an ecclesial ecology is carried forth by stories. Story is and has been one of the dominant genres of Christian faith and practice, and we anticipate that the work of faithful innovation – in so far as it seeks to retain connection to patterns of Christian thought – will be nourished by stories of the living people and communities or are labouring to do this holy-yet-ordinary work well. And even when the work is unfinished or it doesn't fulfil conventional models of success, telling the story has the power to give witness to God's ongoing work in and through our creaturely creations. We offer these words in a similar spirit and hope, giving our creaturely testimony to a broader ecclesial ecology where we hope faithful innovation will find a home.

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