

# Introduction

## **A Parable: Making Good Mistakes**

Unlike my wife, I did not grow up playing tennis. She took years of lessons and played on her high school team. I played soccer and volleyball and surfed instead. When we married, she shared her enthusiasm for tennis with me and suggested we play together. I had played a number of sports; how hard could tennis be? I said sure. On the court, she graciously tried to give me a few pointers as it became rapidly evident to her that I could use some serious lessons. Yet, like many a novice facing the prospect of learning something new, I demurred. We still would occasionally play tennis together. I am enough of a natural athlete to have figured out how to hit the ball where it should go on the court—though not very elegantly or powerfully, needless to say.

A few years ago, my wife prevailed on me to take tennis lessons, using the wise strategy of conspiring with another tennis-playing woman in our church whose husband's game could use some improvement. We invited another mutual friend for strength in numbers. The three of us guys agreed to work with a local tennis instructor, Greg, for the summer. On the first day of lessons, Greg began by asking me to hit some balls with him. After a few tries, he shook his head and said, "No, no, no. Let's try this differently." He began to show me proper form. The problem is that when I tried this unfamiliar way of hitting, the ball was going over the fence and hitting cars in the street. (This is good in baseball,

but not in tennis!) I felt rather embarrassed, as could be expected. But Greg enthusiastically affirmed me: “This is great! You’re making *good* mistakes now.” With some practice, the ball began to go where I wanted it to, with much greater power and accuracy than ever before. Previously, I was making the “bad mistake” of refusing to risk learning. The only way to growth involved making “good mistakes,” even if they provoked in me no small degree of anxiety and embarrassment.

## **Learning and Growing in an Uncertain Age**

This is a book about making good mistakes. Today’s cultural environment presents churches with complex challenges for which there are no easy answers. Churches face dramatically changing cultural surroundings in which established patterns of Christian life and witness no longer connect with many people in the neighborhood. Forming and restoring community with these neighbors for the sake of Christian witness and service requires learning new ways of embodying and communicating the gospel. This work demands much from us and can seem daunting.

In the face of this challenge, many churches seem to be making the much bigger mistake of simply doing what they’ve always done, even if it isn’t connecting deeply with their neighbors—and sometimes their own members—rather than risk learning and growing. The studies of religious affiliation, identity, and participation in American life today suggest a paradox: lingering, widespread Christian affiliation that often lacks depth, coherence, participation, and practice; rapid erosion of religious identification among younger generations; general openness to God and spirituality; and significant resistance to organized forms of religious community.<sup>1</sup> God’s promises in Christ are steadfast, but the shape and future of the church in America is increasingly uncertain.

I know this uncertain future because I come from it. I grew up in a secular home without knowledge of Christian faith or practice. I regarded the churches in my town as religious clubhouses catering to their members; whatever happened inside them was a mystery to me. It would never have occurred to me that Christian community could be the answer to my search for meaning, purpose, identity, and belonging. The last place I would have brought my questions, dreams, and hopes was Sunday worship at one of those churches—nothing could be more intimidating! Were I to show up in many of those congregations, I would have been asked to migrate from my native culture into a “churchy” culture that would have been largely baffling to me. It may have been a culture perfect for fifty or a hundred years ago, but how it related to the gospel of Jesus and today’s world would not have been at all clear.

Fortunately, God used ordinary disciples to meet me where I was and share the gospel with me in terms that I could understand. This witness was embodied in relationships and involved deep listening and acts of compassion. It was in cultural forms that made sense to me yet also challenged me to rethink my assumptions about life and the world. In the decades since then, I have been blessed to journey with a variety of different Christian communities, all of which have been deeply rooted in inherited traditions. Sometimes they have struggled to render those traditions accessible to their neighbors. Yet I have also seen them risk their lives to do so with creativity and love, making the good mistakes necessary to learn and grow. I will share some of their stories in the pages that follow.

I write this book from the perspective of one who knows what it is like to live without the freedom and grace of the gospel; to inhabit a story in which one must try to establish one’s own worth, identity, meaning, and community rather than to receive them as a gift; to be caught in a cycle of estrangement and guilt with no hope of release. In my view, the stakes of the church’s life

and witness couldn't be higher—it is a matter of life and death for us personally, for our neighbors, and for the just and peaceful flourishing of the world. At the same time, my experience serving local churches has given me a profound appreciation for all that makes gospel witness in today's society difficult. I can understand why so many churches have a hard time connecting with their neighbors, particularly those who may speak different cultural languages. This is not easy work.

The church has spent a generation trying various technical fixes to address the decline of membership and institutional influence, while the trends have only continued and grown more widespread. For the most part, it has yet to address the deeper cultural currents at work, currents that undermine the assumptions and practices around which many churches have built their lives. Such assumptions and practices functioned well in embodying and communicating the Christian faith for earlier generations in many ways. Those elders comprise the majority of the membership of many congregations, and their faithfulness is to be praised. They have much to teach us. Yet if local churches are to have a future today, space must be made for new expressions of Christian life and witness to take shape in the native cultures of new generations and populations. *Such expressions must carry forward the best of earlier traditions*, embracing rather than forsaking the wisdom of the past. If, as Richard Foster observes, “Superficiality is the curse of our age,”<sup>2</sup> attempts to render Christianity relevant through stripping it of its depth, rootedness, and distinctiveness will not get the church anywhere.

This work of translating Christian faith and practice into new cultural vernaculars requires deep listening to God, to the tradition, and to neighbors. It requires prayer, patience, discernment, creativity, vulnerability, and risk. It pushes the church deeper into the central narratives of its faith. It is inherently uncontrollable and inevitably messy. It calls for new imagination (ways of

seeing the world), habits, and practices. It is about learning and growing—in other words, *innovation*.

## **A Journey of Exploration**

The innovation explored in this book is not one more quick-fix strategy for the church in order to reclaim some form of institutional success that it has lost. In the face of the more ambiguous, bewildering, and epochal cultural changes surrounding us, it is only natural for churches to look for one more technique or strategy to turn things around. If you're reading this book to find one, you will be disappointed.

Instead, I invite you on a journey of exploration as we approach agility and innovation in light of the church's establishment legacy and the Spirit's movement. In chapter two, we unpack some of the cultural shifts occurring in the twenty-first-century world, particularly those that touch on how people form religious and spiritual identity and community. We then turn in chapter three to tracing God's mission of forming and restoring community through ordinary, fallible people. Chapter four seeks to harvest from the world's most innovative organizations key insights and practices that can help the church learn from God and its neighbors as it embraces agility for the sake of witness and service. Chapter five names disciplines of a learning church, including addressing common obstacles to learning and change. Chapter six engages how church life might be organized to foster innovation, both within existing congregations and new church starts, as well as in theological education. The conclusion attends to a biblical journey in which loss and confusion turn to hope in the presence of the risen Lord. That hope affords us the courage to risk our lives for Christ and our neighbors.

Throughout this story, we will try to keep at the forefront of the discussion the person and power of the Holy Spirit, whose

role in creating and restoring community is central to the biblical story and Christian teaching. The Holy Spirit is the agent of so much of the innovation that we find in the Bible—innovation that emboldens, encourages, and equips ordinary people for transformational witness. An agile church is, above all, a Spirit-led church. The Spirit of the Lord who hovered over the waters at creation, who liberated God’s people from bondage in Egypt, who called judges and prophets to leadership, who rested upon Jesus as he proclaimed the year of Jubilee and healed the sick, who raised Jesus from the dead, who animated the early Christian community and led it out into mission—that very Spirit is doing new things in the church and world today. Our opportunity is to discover and participate in them.