

Does Your Church Function as a Green-Light Church?

I have made the case over the years that ministers and churches must cultivate a spirit of and appreciation for entrepreneurship if they are to thrive in the 21st century.

Living in a post-church and post-Christian culture requires us to become innovative and creative as we seek to make the truth of the gospel relevant to the world we are part of.

I recently heard Greg Jones, former dean at Duke Divinity School, echo that sentiment.

Amid a presentation on trends the church is facing, he spoke of a conversation he had a few years ago with the remarkable [Greg Dees](#), the renown social entrepreneur author and Duke professor (also Stanford, Yale and Harvard).

Dees, a person of faith, said to Jones, “What happened to the church?”

“What do you mean?” Jones asked.

“The church used to be the source of much of the innovation and entrepreneurial work in the world,” Dees said. “But, sometime in the 1970s, the church seems to have stopped trying to be creative and innovative with regard to healthcare, education and poverty.

“You gave that role up and lost your imagination. You abdicated creative imagination to corporate interests and other nonprofits,” he said. “Now, the church is seen as the yellow-light and red-light people. Rather than being people who imagine and improvise and encourage progress, the church appears to decelerate progress.”

Dees’ prophetic words merit serious consideration.

It is worth remembering and considering that churches that risked and invested in meeting the pressing needs of others birthed many of today’s medical centers, hospitals, social service agencies, educational institutions and nonprofit

enterprises.

Nearly all were founded amid economic hardship and duress. Most faced an uphill battle to gain a foothold and survive a myriad of challenges.

Every week, I encounter congregations who feel threatened and are fearful about their future.

The first inclination for many of us in that situation is to batten down the hatches, scale back, reduce exposure and ride out the storm.

Yellow lights start flashing and gradually turn red. When that happens, the downward spiral actually accelerates and the crisis deepens.

When we opt for safety and self-preservation, we stunt the innovative DNA that Jesus personified and infused into the early church.

Congregations are gradually awakening to the fact that Jesus predicted our future with clarity and accuracy when he said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

My experience with churches and clergy echoes Dees' observation. The last third of the 20th century found a spirit of self-preservation and an unhealthy addiction to consumerism begin to dominate the congregational life of established churches.

With the waning of cultural privilege and the erosion of a denominationally provided mission and vision, congregations found themselves adrift without clear identity and purpose.

For many, the result has been a deceleration of innovation and creativity. Churches that had once been "green-light churches" and were leading prophetic voices and catalytic agents in a community now began to obsess over their very survival.

Those green lights turned yellow and then red. The shift wasn't lost upon the younger church leaders who came along.

Church planting became a boom industry as new and young clergy concluded that attempting to "turn around" an existing church required many times more energy

and effort than starting up a new congregation that incorporated entrepreneurship as part of its vision for the future.

Unfortunately, lacking the positive assets of an established church, the [church-planting movement](#) has proven to be just as prone to missteps and failures as established churches.

Perhaps it is time for established churches and newer churches to learn from each other and do together what neither can do alone.

Established churches who partner with new and fresh expressions of church can provide needed stability and support. They can learn how to think outside the box and how to be risk-takers.

Creative and innovative congregations can bring a strong ethos of innovation and entrepreneurship to the table while benefiting from the wisdom and longevity of established congregations.

The potential result is that together we can reclaim our role as “green light” communities of faith who engender creative and innovative methods of being God’s people on mission.

Healthy churches, of any sort, proactively and consciously manage the polarities of tradition and innovation.

Doing so helps us recognize when we have abdicated our role as entrepreneurs for the sake of the gospel.

In the end, we can pray that we allow the spirit of Christ to re-engage our imaginations and lead us to reclaim our role as “the source of much of the innovation and entrepreneurial work in the world.”

✘ [Bill Wilson](#) is president of the Center for Healthy Churches in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. You can follow him on Twitter [@BillWilson1028](#) and the center [@ChurchHealthy](#).