

# Your Church's Future Relies on Imagination, Not Memories

Some call it a battle. Others a wrestling match.

Let's go with something a bit less confrontational and call it a challenge that will impact whether or not your church will survive. I'm describing one of the foundational polarities every church must confront and manage.

Simply put, will your life together be primarily shaped by your memories or by your imagination?

No one questions whether both are important. Our memories and the past are a vital component of a healthy and vibrant faith and church. Our imaginations and the ability to innovate and adapt are a vital component of a healthy and vibrant church.

Neither can exist in an appropriate way without the other.

However, the default position of the vast majority of congregations and parishes is to lean most heavily upon the familiar, the known, the former.

Our imaginations grow weak from lack of use as we loop repeatedly back to what is comfortable and predictable.

Jesus confronted a religious system steeped in tradition and ritual. While honoring those who had gone before him, he also peeled back the layers of meaningless repetition to reveal the original intent and then breathed new life into that truth.

Worship was not about Sabbath rules but about revering almighty God and offering one's self wholly to God.

Sin was not so much a matter of external habits as a habit of the heart.

The love of neighbor was not limited to "people like us" but extended to those very different from "us," even lepers and Samaritans.

In each case, Jesus paid homage to the memories and traditions but landed most

emphatically on the power of imagination to rethink and reframe an eternal truth in a new and innovative way.

The resulting earthquake that rocked the established religious order still reverberates through the church that tries to follow his lead.

Imitating our ancestors, we calcify eternal truth by wrapping it in temporal traditions and practices.

We too often cling to memories and set patterns rather than engage our imaginations and creative capacities.

For example:

When confronted with the challenges of a culture that no longer regards Sunday as sacred space to be set aside for religious activities, we whine and complain about Sunday attendance rather than adapt and adjust to the new lifestyles that we ourselves have adopted.

What is valuable and timeless is the worship of God and the fellowship of faith. What is temporal and open to imaginative reframing is when, how and where that worship and fellowship take place.

When confronted by a pluralistic and diverse community, we revert to primitive thinking about race rather than see this new world as perfectly suited for Jesus' message of inclusion and Christ-centered unity amid diversity.

When facing dwindling financial resources and cumbersome facilities, we double down on guilt-laden stewardship and "clubhouse thinking" about our buildings rather than imaginatively exploring new streams of revenue and using our facilities as community assets rather than private quarters.

When hiring and assigning staff, we repeat patterns from earlier eras that no longer result in effective outcomes rather than reimagine new models of staffing positions and tasks that shift the church culture away from "paying for professional services" toward leading a focused team on a missional adventure that includes everyone taking part as God has gifted and called them.

If your church or faith community is going to have a future, and if you want that future to be more about thriving than simply surviving, you must get this balance

right. Are you going to be primarily driven by memory or imagination?

You will need both. Every church I served on staff was birthed in the 1800s. I understand the power and value and place of memory. I have profound respect for and appreciation of traditions and past practices. I want to honor those who sacrificed mightily for me to have the privilege of ministering in the 21st century.

And yet, I know that a significant part of what got them through the challenges of previous eras was the willingness of those past leaders to engage their imaginations and push past the limitations of their memories.

Like Jesus seeking to reform a tone-deaf religious machine that has lost its way, every generation must confront the temptations of their church to lean on what was and to lean away from what will be.

I'm sorry, but if your church constantly allows your memories to overrule your imaginations, you will die. It really is that simple.

Inviting God's creative Spirit to invade and inhabit our minds and hearts is the first step toward vibrancy and sustainability. Walking by faith and not by sight has always been our challenge.

Blessings to you as you seek to live by faith in the One who gave you an imagination and expects you to use it.

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