Experiments – Mission is Risking Something New

In Retreat 3 we explored the enduring principle - Continuing Revelation - and how we are to be a prophetic people that see beyond the present to God’s unfolding future. We explored an application of Continuing Revelation explained by Walter Brueggemann called prophetic imagination. We explored the following steps for cultivating prophetic imagination:

a. give time and space to be awake to God’s presence and invitation,

b. publicly challenge situations and relationships not in harmony with God’s vision for creation,

c. in relationship with God and one another envision God’s intended future, and

d. risk co-creating and living into God’s future together.

Experiments are how we enact or live into what we imagine in partnership with God and one another. We engage in missional practices to open our spiritual eyes to see ourselves, others, and our world through the lens of God’s unfolding vision. This is represented in the steps of Discover, Envision, and Experiment. They are the prophetic core of the process. Experiments are how we incrementally, through trial and error, experiment our way into the future with God:

- **ENCOUNTER - A Divine Unsettledness**
  
  New and Ancient practices lead to new understandings,

- **DISCOVER - New Questions Emerge**
  
  New understandings lead to new prophetic imagination,

- **ENVISION - New Insights Emerge**
  
  New prophetic imagination leads to new missional experiments,

- **EXPERIMENT - New Ministries Emerge**
  
  New missional experiments lead to new forms of missional life in community,

- **EVALUATE - RENEW - Ongoing Journey**
  
  New forms of missional life lead to a new clarity among competing priorities, and the process continues . . .

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Everything we have been doing in LCM leads to **RISKING SOMETHING NEW WITH GOD** and one another for the sake of our world now!

If we truly seek to embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ then at some point along our journey we will see with new eyes the chasm that exists between the reality of the present and possibility of God’s future!

It is in this space that **MISSION IS TRULY DISRUPTIVE** and compels us to risk stepping with God into the future.

Experimentation is at the heart of incarnational mission – to encounter the Living Christ and then to live and convey essential truths in new language and form!¹ This is the Word made flesh in every new context!² This is the call of a prophetic people!

> *You live in a world with new challenges, and that world will require new forms of ministry.* - Doctrine and Covenants 162:2c

So how do we approach experimentation in the congregation or any small group resting in the status quo? Generally speaking we don’t like change. Experimentation is change and leads to new forms of ministry. Our approach to experimentation, as a pastor leadership team (PLT), has everything to do with whether we gradually step into the future with God or remain entrenched in the status quo.

First we must communicate, **clearly and often**, with the congregation or small group that we are not pursuing wholesale change but learning to follow God into the future by taking small, but significant steps. According to Alan Roxburgh,

> “People have to be reassured that much of their congregational life will remain fairly familiar, and there will be no structural or organizational changes. Rather they should know that they and their leaders are going to discern some creative experiments to address the real, critical, adaptive challenges in becoming a missional community.”

The role of the PLT is to create a stable environment by continuing core ministry functions (i.e. worship, pastoral care, disciple formation) while beginning to

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¹ Doctrine and Covenants 162:2e

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experiment around the edges of the congregation with new forms of ministry and outreach. Experiments are not to disrupt core ministry functions. Rather, they begin to point to the possibility of an alternative future for the congregation.

In the experiment step like all steps RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVERYTHING! In this step we must pay attention to the transitions some people will experience as they begin to realize not everything is going to stay the same. This requires attentiveness, patience, and a willingness to proactively check in with people before they begin to withdraw or exhibit other forms of resistance or even sabotage.

**Conceiving and Launching Experiments**

So how does the PLT go about launching experiments? Guidelines can help everyone know what the ground rules are and reduce potential misunderstandings. Here are some guidelines:

- Individuals involved in an experiment need to convey what they hope will happen as a result of the experiment and how they will evaluate the outcomes of the experiment. Sometimes individuals may need a little help expressing their hopes and outcomes. Patience and attentiveness is critical at this stage!
- When it comes to ministry experiments we are often taking a leap of faith. It is critical for the PLT to continually remind the congregation that some experiments will work well and others not so well. In all cases we will learn together and celebrate our willingness to step into the future with God! Don’t over analyze a proposal or idea for an experiment.
- Experiments that affect the ministries or responsibilities of others need to be coordinated and approved by those affected. Providing an environment conducive to experiments does not mean anything goes.
- Like everything we do in mission, experiments are best when shared with others. The PLT ensures anyone initiating an experiment has at least one partner for support.
- Congregational approval is not needed for an experiment that will not utilize congregational resources or affect existing ministries of the congregation. The nature of experiments requires the PLT create an environment favorable toward risk. Do not hamper experiments with elaborate or unnecessary steps for approval.
- Provide updates to the congregation on successes, challenges, and lessons learned during or throughout the experiment.
- Be attentive to those willing to risk new experiments by often praying for them, offering words of encouragement, and helping coordinate any assistance they may need.
Unlike the scientific method, missional experiments are often less measurable. We don’t always know the outcome of experiments when first started. Sometimes they are leaps of faith. Regardless of the outcome we want to create an environment that supports those willing to take the risk and learn from their experience.

Let’s consider an example. Three people in a congregation want to explore this essential question discerned by the congregation: How is God calling us to develop a relationship with our neighborhood? The group decides to meet every other week in a local coffee house. They commit to talking to others who come into the coffee house. The desired outcome of this experiment may be as simple as wanting to have at least one meaningful conversation with someone from the local neighborhood during each coffeehouse visit. The group agrees to meet for 3 months and then assess if they will continue based on how the group feels about the encounters.

Experiments don’t need to be complicated. The role of the PLT is to encourage prophetic imagination (i.e. inspired new ideas) that lead to experiments that lead to new forms of ministry in a changing world (See The Prophetic Imagination – An Introduction for ideas to stimulate inspiration).

**Questions to Get You Experimenting**

Questions to consider when your prophetic imagination is at work and you are preparing to risk an experiment:

1. What ideas pop into your mind as you pray about mission, share with others in conversation, or engage in the missional practices?
2. Do any of the ideas energize or disrupt you because they connect with your sense of passion or an unfilled need?
3. How do the ideas connect with one or more of the five mission initiatives?
4. What do you hope will happen if you try your idea as an experiment?
5. Who else does your experiment involve?
6. How will you describe your experiment to the others involved and get their support?
7. What do you need to start your experiment?
8. What’s stopping you from experimenting?
9. How can the PLT help facilitate your experiment?
10. What period of time is needed for doing the experiment before stepping back to evaluate the outcomes with others?
11. If the experiment is successful and is becoming part of the missional life of the congregation, what do you give up to make room for this new ongoing ministry?

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Remember, the missional practices create fertile ground for new insights (i.e. prophetic imagination) as does our willingness to be in conversation and dream a little about God’s future in the places we serve. On the last page of this document you will find a suggested format for constructing and experiment entitled “Launching Experiments”.

Potential Areas for Experiments

As you reflect on your experience with leading your congregation in mission consider some of the following potential areas for experiments:

- Discuss and pray about one or more essential questions for the future of mission in your congregation. These questions are an excellent source for new ideas and experiments.
- Consider ways to deepen relationships outside the congregation with special retreats or activities like Sharing Your Congregational Story.
- Experiment with different forms of worship that deepen relationships with God, one another, and your neighbors. (See Worship as Community Practice from Retreat 2. At the end of this resource you will find sample worship outlines where you can experiment with different forms of worship. Remember to experiment around the edges. Use wisdom about how many times each month you experiment with new forms of worship. Be aware and sensitive to your congregation.)
- Experiment with new ways to stimulate prophetic imagination. (See The Prophetic Imagination – An Introduction from Retreat 3 for ideas on how to cultivate an environment favorable for prophetic imagination.)
- Experiment with the three shared missional practices— Dwelling in the Word, Mission Prayer, and Sharing in the Round. How can these practices be integrated into worship, fellowship activities, and small groups?
- Experiment with new missional practices. Consider developing meaningful practices that draw you into relationship with God, one another, and your neighbors? Remember practices are a commitment to a repetitive discipline that over time can become a new way of life.
- Experiment with any of the five mission initiatives. Pose essential questions for each mission initiative. Then begin to envision about what experiments would look like to test your questions.

The possibilities for experiments are endless! May the Spirit disrupt and guide you into new insights, experiments, and forms of ministry in a changing world!

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Launching Experiments

The intent of this document is to help assist an individual or group express their idea and approach for an experiment.

Proposed Idea or Question – In a few sentences describe your idea or question. You may also wish to share what led you to this idea or question.

Proposed Experiment - In a few sentences share how you would like to approach testing your idea or question. Consider the following as an outline:

- What steps will you take to experiment with your idea or test your question?
- Who will you involve in your experiment? (It is strongly encouraged that everyone have at least one person to partner with in their experiment)
- What is the time frame for your experiment?
- What outcomes do you hope to realize?

Resources – In a few sentences outline any resource needs (i.e. people, money, use of church building etc.) to launch your experiment.

Points of Collaboration – Does your proposed experiment touch any existing ministries or activities of the congregation? If so who do you need to collaborate with prior to moving forward with your experiment?

Reflection and Evaluation – What are some initial ideas on how you might evaluate your progress against your hoped for outcomes? This is not intended to discourage the experiment but to open up conversation that may be helpful in constructing the experiment.

Check In – At what intervals do you plan on sharing your experiences and progress? Also when do you plan to step back and evaluate with your partner(s) if the experiment should continue.