

The Innovation Crisis: Creating Disruptive Influence in the Ministry You Lead

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Reviewed by “Bill” in the Arabian Gulf



Bill served in the Middle East for over forty years, mostly as a tentmaker in the Arabian Gulf. His family shares Christ with Gulf locals, builds up local believers, and encourages churches to pray for and reach out to locals. His university studies and initial work focused in part on improving organizational systems and operations.

What does the Lord of the harvest want us to do? What new steps should we take to better reach our world for Christ?

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Summary of Content

This book begins with William Carey’s famous words, “Expect great things, attempt great things”¹ (13). Esler presents the need for innovators

1 William Carey, a British shoemaker, is known as the father of modern missions. He was a foundational missionary to India, starting many leading institutions and missionary practices still ongoing today such as medical work, Bible translation, and printing, and wrote the groundbreaking book, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (23–26).

and shows how Jesus was an innovator: he taught New Testament ways quite different from the old traditions (16–17). Today, a successful ministry may find it especially difficult to adjust as the circumstances around it change. Esler speaks of the Body of Christ as an “eccliosystem”—like an ecosystem, but for churches (the *ekklesia*) and Christian ministries. As an ecosystem constantly adapts, so should the eccliosystem, responding to external and internal changes (32–34).

First, Esler focuses on understanding the problem – the need for innovation. He gives what he calls the rules of “Shoemaker William Carey,” the innovator:

1. See a Problem Worth Solving
2. Ride the Wave of Existing Innovation
3. Be Biased to Action
4. Empathize then Strategize
5. Think Big (35–36)

Innovation means rethinking what an organization does and why.

A common problem that hinders innovation is merely doing more of the same. This appears successful but does not necessarily better accomplish the ministry’s mission. Focusing only on quantitative growth hides the need for innovation as circumstances change (49–50). Some ministries and companies become so defined by what they do that they cannot consider doing something different, even if it would better accomplish their goals.

Esler speaks of an innovation spectrum, starting with stagnating, then merely sustaining, then innovating, and finally disrupting (54–63). Instead of considering alternatives, some organizations focus only on sustaining what they have always done. A business competitor may come with an innovative approach, and a company must quickly adapt or die. Previously successful ministries may survive longer but may not be using the Lord’s resources for the best result. Organizations should focus on solving a problem not just on carrying out an activity (66–73).

The author also encourages innovators to take advantage of the moment – any special features of the age that provide new opportunities. This could be cumulative, adding one special feature to another in order to solve problems. Some examples include a stack of free technological tools, mass collaboration, and capacity utilization (79–104).

Esler goes on to attack myths about who can be an innovator; he believes anyone can be an innovator by combining things in a new way. Innovation may be incremental, but it takes the hard work of thinking, envisioning, and putting the pieces together. Leaders need to develop an environment of trust, of openness to honesty and innovation, and of experimenting and learning from failure (107–129). According to Esler, there are five stages of design thinking: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test. The biggest problem is often an unwillingness to let go of the status quo (138–148).

Introducing the term “wicked problem,” Esler describes it as a very complex problem that is difficult to solve (155–158). Many societal problems as well as some Great Commission problems can be considered “wicked problems.”² Five watershed Great Commission problems have been “solved” through innovation, according to Esler:

1. Rediscovery of the Great Commission by William Carey
2. Bible Translation as a missionary task
3. Democratized fundraising to pay for salaries and ministry expenses
4. The reframing of mission around unreached people groups
5. The indigenization of mission and field leadership (162–63)

He writes, “As we look back on the history of the church, it can be hard for us to see that innovation has played a significant role. This is

2 Examples of “solved” wicked problems Esler mentions: in the US, greatly reducing the smoking rate from 45% in 1954 to 16% in 2018, greatly reducing traffic deaths, and medical breakthroughs; in India, greatly reducing the killing of widows (158–162).

because innovation, once it happens, becomes obvious” (162). Some strategies for addressing “wicked problems” are: collaborating at scale, developing a shared understanding of the issues, reframing the problem, identifying root causes, giving freedom for many solutions, inventing, and innovating (166–176).

Next, Esler describes how to identify innovation targets, including “learning from outside your domain” (181–182). Esler believes the book *Ten Types of Innovation: The Discipline of Building Breakthrough* has helpful “taxonomies” of types of innovation: outcomes of the ministry (stakeholders, collaboration and evaluation), services the ministry provides (experience, identity,³ and relevance) and organization of the ministry (economic engine, structure and methodology) (182–209). Furthermore, he considers innovative leadership: how leaders can foster innovation, allow for failure as learning opportunities, empower entrepreneurs, and encourage a sense of urgency (211–228). Then, he focuses on individual innovators. His online test⁴ can show how innovative you are in each of six areas: risk-taking, curiosity, initiative, creativity, collaboration, and flexibility (231–242).

Innovation Challenges in the Middle East

I comment below on some of Esler’s examples related to the Middle Eastern context, critiquing or adding to his perspective, before concluding with reflections on specific innovation needs in the Arabian Gulf.

Church Planting Methodology

When discussing innovation targets, Esler discusses traditional church planting vs. CPM (204–207). I found the author’s comparison between

3 An example he gives under “identity”: the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions rebranded as Citygate Network, opening the potential to network with other ministries also helping low-income people, with medical needs (191–193).

4 theinnovationcrisis.com

the two sometimes unclear, and at times, even unfair. The comparison table he presents is not helpful; it is quite general (e.g., higher vs. lower church government, deductive vs. inductive, training vs. learning, slower vs. faster). The traditional CP method he describes sounds very church-centered and old school—say from the 1800s, not current methods. The controversial distinctives of CPM are not made clear.

Interestingly, Esler says David Garrison's book, *Church Planting Movements*, was developed by observing what was done where the church was growing rapidly (204). Of course, correlation is not causality; the methods observed did not necessarily cause the church growth. Some positive CPM distinctives such as learner-centered, inductive, and group study have been used for decades before CPM by traditional CP workers, as seen in *Progressing Together*, long a popular discipleship method in North Africa, and now in the Middle East and online.⁵

We Americans often have a strong bias toward what's novel, thinking something is good because it is new. At the same time, as Esler describes, Christian organizations often have a strong bias toward the old (e.g., 13–16, 19–20, 55). We need to consider not just if something is new, but if it is a better methodology (more biblical or impactful) and will result in a more effective organization that can better accomplish its goals.

Organizational Change in the Middle East

When it comes to changes in missions, we should ask whether the changes are positive or not. In his book, Esler speaks well of one organization's belated push into tentmaking, setting up a kingdom recruitment company (207–209). In light of my and some others' experiences in the Gulf, I wonder if this organization's change represented an improvement to separate recruitment efforts from the field workers who know more about the receiving companies and necessary preparation for ministry?

5 <https://www.progressingtogether.com>

Similarly, although not an emphasis previously, new leadership of another large mission started mobilizing tentmakers as donations for salaried workers declined. Formerly, this mission often worked among a narrowly defined set of unreached people groups but created a new focus on global cities, seeking to reach whoever was there. This raises the question of whether it is a good innovation to add unfocused, tentmaking missionaries to focused, salaried missionaries? In light of these examples, one should ask what the best way is for a mission to combine supported and tentmaking workers, and ultimately, how leaders can best bring about change?

Greg Livingstone, *Frontiers'* founder, was an innovator (223–225). At the time, mission organizations talked about field teams, but scattered workers made it difficult. Greg gave team leaders autonomy, room for failure, and responsibility to recruit their own team. He trained workers in controversial field methodologies, and over time, autonomous teams received more support. Starting fresh can be messy, but many Americans were attracted to the challenge to try something new.

How can an old organization initiate positive innovation? Greg, previously the US Director of North Africa Mission (NAM), brought on a surge of new tentmaking recruits, challenging them to try new things. As NAM expanded into the Middle East (becoming Arab World Ministries, which later merged into Pioneers), new workers quickly became leaders, unwritten policies became unknown, written policies were adapted, and new leaders tried new things. Later, a leader in the Middle East encouraged his team to think of an innovative idea, suggesting a kingdom recruitment company; one of his leaders instead suggested an Arabic language school which later became a crucial inter-mission program. As seen here, innovation can happen through changes in structure and policies as well as through the expansion of recruits into new territory and leaders pushing for innovative ideas.

How can an organization best change its culture and methods? Some organizations are able to create several new ministries with different focuses, allowing team or country leaders enough independence to start

something which can later develop its own identity. Another way to seek innovation is found in *Pioneers' Seeds Global Innovation Laboratory* ("Seeds"), directed by Robert Wassel. Seeds' initial focus on innovative projects, which required them to identify specific problems, changed to propagating a culture of innovation which could spread more widely (137–138, 218). Interestingly, multi-million dollar companies tend to love this training (and happily pay for it), but ministries are not so interested. One must ask "why?" Do field workers feel freedom and capacity to learn and try new things?

Brainstorming Outreach Innovations to Solve Arabian Gulf Problems

In light of Esler's ideas on innovation, we should ask how we might innovate in our own fields of work. What problems need to be solved? What new technologies might help? Here, I list seven common problems I have seen in Arabian Gulf ministry that could benefit from innovative thinking.

1. How do we find interested Gulf locals? We meet most believers in the Gulf at church or via media because they do not come to faith through workers, but on their own. Most seek God secretly and anonymously online. More could be done to reach Gulf locals through the internet, through existing online communities, and through new, faith-friendly ones.
2. Who has time for innovation? In the Gulf, most workers have full-time jobs with limited time for ministry, let alone envisioning new ministry. Those working part-time could spearhead online innovation, partnering across teams and locations. May the Lord raise up key workers to catalyze this!
3. How can we encourage Gulf believers, often secret believers, to sensitively share with locals? In addition to sharing in person, can we partner with locals to envision an attractive online presence for seekers or for "followers of the Way" (Acts 9:2)?

4. In the Arabian Gulf, locals consider it unthinkable to become a follower of Christ. Steve Richardson, the President of Pioneers USA, and his wife Arlene faced this problem in South East Asia as well (195–196): locals could not imagine becoming believers in Christ, so the Richardsons publicized stories of local believers until it became well-known. Similarly, we could tell stories online of Gulf believers.
5. Once, as a Western tentmaker was going to share Christ with a local work colleague in the Gulf, the man said, “If what you have to tell me is just for me, I’m not interested; if it’s something for my community, I’m all ears.” Christ transforms all areas of life, including government, business, non-profits, and how we care for others. So, how can we counteract the lie that Christianity is simply a matter of personal faith with no impact on our community?
6. Many workers (and many Christian Arab youth) do not have good Arabic language skills for witnessing. Could expatriate Arab colleagues help?
7. Single young men believers outnumber young women believers ten to one. In light of this, how can we reach more young women? And how can the young men find believing wives?

Evaluation & Recommendation

With wise sayings sprinkled throughout, Esler mentions many examples of innovation in industries and ministries and encourages thinking big. He knows what he’s talking about, has read widely, and simply introduces the basics of design thinking to help envision new ways of doing things. Each chapter ends with a section for application, discussion, team exercise, and discussion. However, an index is one missing component that would help readers find specific memorable details.

With much to mine from it, this book requires a second reading to fully absorb the details. But, the broad picture is clear: Christian organizations and people seeking to break through tough ground need to consider new ways of doing things and take advantage of new technological, cultural, and religious opportunities for the sake of the gospel.

In my context in the Arabian Gulf, innovation remains a need. Of course, we could simply continue logging hours spent with Muslims, a good activity we have always practiced. However, workers should deeply consider the “Innovation Crisis” in our midst and the problems and opportunities of our moment. Time is short, but we are not alone—we labor alongside fellow harvest laborers and with God’s help.

What does the innovation crisis look like in your context, and how will you respond?

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Acknowledgments