

Confronting the invisible barrier to deeper discipleship

By Brandon Shields

I was a pastor committed to closing the discipleship gap.
But first I needed to grapple with something I couldn't see.

A few years into planting our church, I came to a painful realization: despite our passion for formation, we had a major discipleship gap — and it wasn't closing.

I had been on my own formation journey personally, leaning into deeper healing and transformation, but our church architecture hadn't followed. We hadn't yet allowed our vision of apprenticeship to Jesus to reshape our model of church. That was the first wake-up call: a challenge of church integration.

But beneath that was something even deeper — something slower to name and harder to fix. I began to ask: *Where did my model of church come from in the first place?* The question that haunted me was this: *What if the biggest barrier to transformation in our community wasn't strategy or structure, but the limits of my own pastoral imagination?*

This was the beginning of what I now call the challenge of pastoral imagination — the hidden, implicit assumptions that block our ability to imagine a different approach to discipleship. We need a quiet, interior reformation — not a rejection of tradition, but a reckoning with how invisible forces have shaped my mental framework for what I believe church could be or should be. And a hopefulness for the rediscovery and renewal that comes when we invite the

Spirit to expand our imagination for what's possible in the local church through exploring some ancient pathways.

The power of imagination and mental maps

Imagination is one of the most powerful and pervasive forces shaping individuals, institutions, and even religious movements. The reality is that while we all live from our imagination, we rarely stop to consider the nature of our imagination and how it has been formed or malformed.

What is imagination? At the simplest level, imagination refers to the mind's process of forming interpretive images and ideas that help us make sense of reality. Imagination is more than an individual genetic predisposition or act of consciousness; our imaginations are profoundly shaped by our social contexts.

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Our explicit experiences with other people, our physical environment, and our cultural institutions (what Christian philosophers call [social imaginaries](#) or [cultural liturgies](#)) get internalized over time into what psychologists call our "[mental maps](#)" – a network of memories, perceptions, interpretations, and automatic responses. These internal grids form a precognitive, implicit, and unconscious framework that influences how we show up in our relationships, our work, and our lives.

The open secret of pastoral ministry is that we all live and lead from a horizon of possibility that has been deeply shaped, both for good and for ill, by social forces that are largely invisible to us. We tend to reproduce the rituals and relational patterns that were "givens" in our family of origin, and the same is true in our spiritual families. Despite our best intentions,

we're prone to uncritically reproducing the implicit assumptions, values, practices, and models that we've inherited.

And this also means that when it comes to exploring new pathways for discipleship, it's nearly impossible to imagine our churches becoming something that we have never experienced or seen firsthand. It's not that we don't want to change; it's that we physiologically can't radically break from what we're already doing. *It turns out that doing slightly different iterations of the same thing the same way and expecting different results isn't always insanity – it's neurobiology!*

Four models that helped me – but constrained my imagination

This is what I kept running into in the early years of trying to re-architect our church around a vision of discipleship. As much as I loved Dallas Willard's ideas, the constraints of my pastoral imagination kept me tethered to self-imposed boundaries of what church should be like.

It limited my ability to envision, explore, and experiment with different approaches for translating *beautiful formation ideas* into *realistic formation models* while still remaining faithful to my own theological tradition.

As I reflected back on my story and experiences, I noticed that there were at least four ecclesial "mental models" that were exerting a significant influence on my pastoral imagination in this season:

- the *Baptist Congregational Tradition* that formed my earliest experiences of following Jesus as a teenager and young adult
- the *Suburban Megachurch Movement* where I spent 20 formative years in pastoral ministry
- the *Reformed Gospel-Centered Movement* that I encountered in my 20s through the teachings of Tim Keller and catalyzed my church planting journey
- the *Missional Movement* that I adopted as my playbook for church planting (largely in reaction to my earlier megachurch experiences).

These church streams, of course, were situated within a broader river of American evangelical social imaginaries – assumptions, ideas, images, habits, stories, and values – going back hundreds of years. These "imaginaries" are behind a particular evangelical imagination and

subcultures that shape our thoughts, our publishing, our sermons, our leadership, and most importantly our models of church.

Furthermore, I came to a deeper understanding of how this evangelical imagination had been shaped by the Enlightenment and the American dream. As Christian historian Willie James Jennings notes, "Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination."

Now let me be clear: I'm grateful for my evangelical heritage and I celebrate many of the formative lessons that I still carry with me today as a pastor: a deep love for the local church, liturgy, preaching, Scripture, intercessory prayer, mission, and urban ministry. I'm not writing as a cynical outsider seeking to dismantle these models, but as a loving insider who longs to see them renewed by expanding our imagination for formation within the diversity of our tradition, context, and heritage.

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anything different for the future.*

Each of these streams is a tributary that has been shaped in different ways throughout history by the great river of the spiritual formation tradition, and every generation has gaps that can lead them to rediscover fresh pathways for the Spirit's work of renewal in their time and place.

My deeper insight with respect to my pastoral formation journey was that the models that formed me also blinded me to their shaping influence. They were my primary frame for understanding what a "church" could be: how we should gather, how big we should be, how we measure pastoral success, what practices get emphasized, how we pace our ministry, our theory of change, and a million other things.

Here is the paradox I was forced to confront: *It was the very models that served as pillars of my current imagination formation that were now becoming prisons stifling my ability to imagine anything different for the future.*

Rediscovering ancient approaches to modern pains

I faced a personal crisis when it became apparent that my existing models weren't producing rigorous discipleship and deep transformation in my church and in the broader American evangelical church of which I was a product. In some ways, they were even working against Jesus' kingdom vision.

This was partly due to some distortions and failures within these models, and partly due to the fact that the world around us has shifted dramatically from the late 20th century, post-World War 2 milieu in which these models were developed.

What I needed was the ability to imagine a new model of formation for my church. And by "new," I mean an ancient way that draws on the best wisdom of the church throughout history

As a church planter in 2016, I was asking different questions and trying to solve for a new set of challenges – post-Christian urban secularism, digital addiction and distraction, busyness, burnout, exhaustion, anxiety, a loneliness and mental health epidemic, and political polarization – that my models weren't set up to fully address.

What I needed was the ability to imagine a new model of formation for my church. And by "new," I mean an ancient way that draws on the best wisdom of the church throughout history and around the global church today, what some call the "Great Tradition."

A way of following Jesus together that includes not only the *congregational* model but also other historical expressions of church that the modern evangelical movement has largely forgotten:

- The *monastic model* – the dominant Medieval era structure for church formalized by St. Benedict in the 6th century and inspiring modern communities like Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde and Schaeffer's L'Abri retreat centers.

- The *apostolic model* – "missional" movements like the Celtic monasteries, the Jesuits, Zinzendorf's *Herrnhut*, Wesley's missionary societies, and YWAM's Kona base.

A way of seeing and being in the world that is not only post-Enlightenment but pre-modern: embodied, relational, practice-based, emotionally-informed, communal, and contemplative.

I believe this is one of the great calls on this generation of pastors: a renewal of our pastoral imagination for an ancient, pre-modern way of church that is both contextualized to our modern, secular, digital age and faithful to the contours of our own historic Christian traditions.

As the Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson once said, "What is critical [for pastors] is an imagination large enough to contain all of life, all worship and work as prayer, set in a structure [*askesis*] adequate to the actual conditions in which it is lived out."

Allowing Jesus to reform our "destructive images and ideas"

How do we approach the complex work of renewing our pastoral imagination?

The starting place is to become aware of how our imaginations have been shaped by our contexts and experiences. In the childhood game of pin the tail on the donkey, a blindfold is placed over your eyes and you're spun around until you're disoriented. It's not until the blindfold is removed that you can orient yourself and properly place the pin.

Similarly, we have to create space in our lives to "remove the blindfold" and understand how our past experiences have oriented and disoriented us for our current work of pastoral ministry.

In his classic book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard writes, "We live at the mercy of our ideas because the will can only act in terms of the ideas and feelings we have ... The process of spiritual formation is one of progressively replacing those destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself."

This process is what St. Paul calls the "renewing of our minds" in Romans 12, and it's what we see Jesus doing throughout the Gospels as he accessed, subverted, and reshaped people's distorted imaginations through parables, stories, and embodied practices oriented toward

the kingdom of God. In the same way, we need to allow Jesus to sanitize our pastoral imaginations.

Reshaping our imagination starts with the difficult inner work of contemplation, or slowing down for prayerful reflection in the presence of the Trinity. We tend to relegate the practice of contemplation to our personal lives, but what if we applied it to our pastoral vocation?

An invitation to reflection

I want to invite you to spend some time reflecting on the stories and teachings of Jesus concerning the nature of his kingdom. I'd recommend starting with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7, or the Parables in Matthew 13. Consider engaging Scripture imaginatively through two historic practices: *lectio divina* and *visio divina*.

- *Lectio divina* – slowly encountering God in the text through four movements: read (*lectio*), meditate (*meditatio*), pray (*oratio*), contemplate (*contemplatio*).
- *Visio divina* – slowly encountering God through Scripturally-based images like Cosimo Rosselli's painting "[The Sermon on the Mount](#)" or Pieter Bruegel's painting "[Parable of the Sower](#)."

Then ask for the Holy Spirit's help as you prayerfully examine the images, stories, practices, and values that guide your framework for pastoral ministry and church. You may also find it helpful to discuss these insights with a group of pastor friends to widen the circle of perspectives.

Here are some prompts to guide your reflection time:

- Who are the key people who have shaped my life? What did I learn from them about reality?
- What stories, ideas, images, and habits make up my "mental model" for pastoral ministry?
- Why do I do ministry and church the way I do them?
- What are my core values and metrics for success? Where did those come from?

- What similarities and differences do I notice between Jesus' ideas and images about the kingdom and mine?
- What is good, true, and beautiful that I need to celebrate and keep?
- What is malformed that I may need to replace?
- What is missing or incomplete that I may need to create?

About Brandon Shields

Brandon brings 25 years of pastoral experience to his role of director of church formation at Practicing the Way, including 13 years as lead pastor and founder at Soma Church in Indianapolis. He is the contributing author to several books on pastoral ministry and holds a degree in business, a graduate degree in missiology, and a doctorate in leadership. Brandon has been married for 20 years and has four children.

About Practicing the Way

Practicing the Way is a nonprofit that creates spiritual formation resources for churches and small groups learning how to become apprentices of the Way of Jesus.

We believe one of the greatest needs of our time is for people to discover how to become lifelong disciples of Jesus. To that end, we help people learn how to be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did through the practices and rhythms he and his earliest followers lived by.

All of our resources are available for free, thanks to the generosity of [The Circle](#) and other givers. The Circle is a group of monthly givers from around the world who partner with us to see formation integrated into the church at large.

To learn more, visit practicingtheway.org.