

Practicing Innovation

We've developed a framework for innovation called Practicing Innovation. It is designed to explore why and how theological schools can innovate faithfully. It is not about chasing trends or proposing quick fixes. Instead, it is rooted in a theological commitment to joining God on mission and embodied through various practices that help to form organizations into communities that practice what they preach

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PRACTICING INNOVATION IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Over the past fifteen years, I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of Christian organizations. These groups include Bible colleges, seminaries, universities, local churches, denominations, and mission agencies. My conversations with their leaders have taken me down dirt roads in Africa, across sand dunes near the Persian Gulf, into countless conference rooms, and onto video production sets. Between sunburns, stale coffee, and Zoom fatigue, discussions consistently circled back to one question, “What is the future of theological education?”

These conversations frequently touched upon innovation, often focusing specifically on the development of new programs. This makes sense because of the noticeable rise in change petitions submitted to ATS. In fact, ATS has recorded a twenty percent increase in change petitions from member schools in the past five years alone. Moreover, since 2020, the number of requests for new programs has more than doubled. At the same time, enrollment across theological schools remains mostly flat, financial deficits persist, and student debt continues to be a complex problem.

Given this reality, I believe theological education needs a new approach to innovation. Fortunately, we have had the opportunity to test this thinking over the past several years. In addition to the work we are doing at KairosUniversity, I have had the privilege of working on a few projects with several different schools who are interested in innovation. To aid in that work, I developed a framework for innovation called Practicing Innovation. It is designed to explore why and how theological schools can innovate faithfully. It is not about chasing trends or proposing quick fixes. Instead, it is rooted in a theological commitment to joining God on mission and embodied through various practices that help to form organizations into communities that practice what they preach. Like most work that is formational in nature, the process often involves identifying and confronting barriers honestly and carefully while embodying practices that form and shape a new way of being.

Ultimately, I suggest that innovation in theological education is about creating communities that are responsive to God’s ongoing mission in the world. It is about nurturing a way of being that is shaped not only by tradition but also by discernment and stewardship. Therefore, our pursuit of innovation is fundamentally an act of faithfulness, grounded in a belief that God is continually inviting us into new expressions of mission and ministry.

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WHY WE INNOVATE IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

When people talk about innovation in theological education, the conversation often circles around building new programs or identifying new “markets” for what schools offer. As a result, the conversation often sounds almost identical to what one might hear in a company trying to sell more of its product. Given this scenario, it isn’t surprising that people wonder if talk about innovation in theological education is merely about chasing the latest trends or adopting flashy terminology. I understand that reaction because I have seen innovation in theological education be reduced to “ideas for new products.” We have fallen into the same trap as many in the corporate world (which is ironic because most literature on innovation will say product innovation usually fails to have lasting impact).

When I talk about practicing innovation, I am speaking of something fundamentally different. I am describing an intentional practice rooted in our calling to follow Jesus faithfully, to discern deeply, and to steward wisely what God has entrusted to us. As a result, it seems important to start with Scripture.

We Innovate Because We Are Sent

In John 20:21, the risen Christ tells his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” As followers of Jesus, we are sent into the world as participants in the mission of God. We participate in the work of innovation because we have been sent by Jesus to participate in God’s grand renewal project by the power of the Spirit. We cannot rest in our places of comfort and power. Instead, we must follow Jesus into the world as we participate in the creativity of God – welcoming the change it requires of us.

We Innovate Because Discernment Is Ongoing

Secondly, innovation matters because discernment never ends. In John 16:13, Jesus promises his followers that the Spirit will guide us into all truth. This guidance is not a single moment of revelation. Instead, it unfolds continually as we walk together in discipleship. Following Jesus requires attentiveness to what the Spirit might be saying to us, even when those messages come through difficult questions, painful realities, or voices that challenge our comfortable assumptions.

Discernment, therefore, requires humility and openness. Over the past fifteen years as I have traveled and sat with leaders in diverse contexts, I have seen how deeply challenging this can be. It is far easier to hold tightly to familiar answers and practices. Yet, if we desire to remain responsive to the Spirit, we must nurture communities where listening and questioning are encouraged. Because of this, innovation becomes a natural outcome of communities that regularly pause, listen, and respond to the fresh insights of the Spirit. We participate in the work of innovation because following Jesus is a formational, long-term, ever-unfolding, developmentally-oriented endeavor that requires ongoing communal discernment. That is to say this work

requires continual change.

We Innovate Because We Are Stewards

Thirdly, we innovate because we have a responsibility as stewards. In Matthew 25:19-21, the parable of the talents reminds us that stewardship involves actively putting what we have been given to fruitful use. We are called not simply to preserve resources and traditions but to put them to work in meaningful and impactful ways.

In theological schools today, resources can feel scarce. In many places, enrollment numbers have stagnated or declined, financial deficits persist, and student debt remains a profound concern. Nevertheless, stewardship calls us to look beyond scarcity and to ask important questions about how we steward God's resources in fresh and faithful ways. Innovation, therefore, is not primarily about having more resources. It is about faithfully and creatively stewarding the resources we already hold, discerning together how God invites us to use them in this particular moment. We participate in the work of innovation because we are stewarding vast storehouses full of God's resources. We must not strive merely for sustainability or survival. Faithful stewards are productive conduits (as opposed to protective managers) of God's blessing. This requires ongoing attentiveness to the way God's resources are being utilized and the fruit we are seeing, thereby encouraging ongoing change.

But Why?

As we reflect on these three convictions, I would suggest that innovation is not a luxury or a distraction. It is an essential practice, deeply embedded in the journey of discipleship. We innovate because we want to align our daily actions with our theological commitments. We innovate because our calling requires thoughtful engagement with the changing realities around us.

Yet, if innovation is so clearly part of our calling, why does meaningful change often feel impossible in theological education? In the rest of this white paper, we will explore that question. We will name a few significant barriers that institutions frequently face, and I will share several embodied practices that can help theological communities move forward, not perfectly, but faithfully.

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BARRIER 1: COMPETITIVE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Governance, when done well, enables a community to faithfully live into its mission. It provides structures for organizing our shared life together, facilitates trust among community members, invites broad participation, and creates the necessary space for meaningful discernment. At its best, governance is not about control or power, but about collaboration and stewardship. Yet, in my experience working with theological schools and ministries around the world, governance rarely operates so smoothly. Instead, what frequently emerges is a subtle yet persistent competition that quietly erodes unity.

While shared governance is touted as a lofty goal in the world of higher education, I would suggest it has become the source of several issues. Many of these stem from a common theme noted by Dan Aleshire while he was serving as the Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools. In a presentation about governance, he remarked, “Schools often think about governance as control and who has it rather than mission fulfillment.” Consequently, governance within institutions tends to become a competition for power, resources, influence, time, energy, and attention.

The issue is not governance itself. The trouble arises when governance disconnects from mission and shifts toward managing power. When this occurs, individuals and groups within institutions tend to hold tightly to areas of perceived power. Time, resources, influence, and attention start to feel like limited commodities to be defended, controlled, or competed over.

As a result, efforts meant to distribute responsibility and create greater unity instead produce silos, encouraging people to narrow their focus to a particular aspect of the work and champion that one cause. While this initially seems like an effective way to boost productivity, engagement, and efficiency, history tells a different story. In reality, this approach often fosters distrust, dis-integration, silos, and battles over finances, control, and decision-making. This silo mentality ultimately causes our shared calling to unravel.

Over time, fragmentation deeply affects institutional culture. It breeds mistrust among community members and generates confusion about decision-making processes and motivations. What began as a vision for ensuring multiple viewpoints are engaged in governance quickly devolves into defensive postures, with different groups viewing one another with skepticism and caution. The resulting mistrust leads to significant fatigue and even burnout within the community. Energy that could otherwise be directed toward mission-critical work instead goes into navigating internal tensions and misunderstandings.

In my experience, this quiet, internal competition among governance structures is one of the most significant yet overlooked barriers to innovation. Institutions frequently possess genuine theological motivation, adequate resources, and sincere intentions to innovate faithfully. Yet when governance systems are shaped primarily by internal competition rather than collaborative partnership, every new idea becomes a source of further tension rather than hopeful progress. Even modest efforts toward change can feel overwhelming and exhausting

before any real action begins.

Acknowledging the presence and consequences of competitive governance structures is a crucial first step. This acknowledgment is not about assigning blame but rather about honestly naming the reality we face. When we recognize how competitive governance shapes our institutions, we can begin imagining more trust-based and collaborative alternatives. From that place of honesty, grounded in a commitment to mission fulfillment rather than control, we can start taking deliberate, faithful steps toward a governance structure that truly serves the mission of theological education. In many cases, however, the lack of trust, fragmentation and internal competition tends to foster conflicting views of reality.

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BARRIER 2: CONFLICTING VIEWS OF REALITY

One of the unintended outcomes of our typical approaches to shared governance is that they often produce internal competition for power and resources. This competition, though subtle, significantly influences the way we define the problems our institutions face. Because each group within the institution is trying to advocate for its own priorities, multiple conflicting narratives begin to emerge. Rather than uniting around a common understanding, we find ourselves caught in separate interpretations of the reality we face.

For example, there may be a shared feeling that the school needs more students. At first glance, this appears to be a straightforward and universally acknowledged concern. Upon closer examination, however, it often becomes evident that the reasons behind why it matters are rarely agreed upon. So, while there may seem to be a shared understanding of reality, the fact is that multiple understandings of reality exist. One group may feel that the problem to solve is marketing and communication. That is to say, “enrollment is a problem because we have poor marketing and recruitment efforts.” Another group might suggest enrollment is an issue because the programs are outdated and there is resistance to trying something new. Still another group might suggest the issue is that the school doesn’t have enough scholarship funds available for students.

While each of these perspectives may merit, they differ fundamentally from one another and create conflicting views of reality. As a result, there is no shared problem to solve. However, because the surface-level assumption that “we need more students” seems to be shared, conversations quickly devolve into arguments over potential solutions.

The internal competition fostered by our default approach to governance exacerbates this problem. Each constituency’s narrative privileges its own reality, making it difficult for the institution as a whole to clearly identify the underlying issues that require innovation. As these different realities solidify into competing narratives, institutional unity begins to fracture. Instead of collaborating around shared problems, various

groups push their own solutions, each grounded in their unique interpretation of reality.

Ultimately, addressing conflicting views of reality is essential because it allows us to unite our efforts around genuine institutional priorities rather than competing narratives. Instead of scattering the resources and energy we have been entrusted with, we can direct them toward solutions that reflect a unified vision and a clearly understood purpose.

Without a shared understanding of the problems we face, our innovation efforts naturally become fragmented and resource draining. Consequently, we assume that the problem lies in insufficient resources, leading to the conclusion that we simply need more money to fund more innovation.

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BARRIER 3: RESOURCE-DEPENDENT MINDSETS

We noted that conflicting views of reality can be a significant barrier to innovation. When an institution cannot clearly identify the problem it is trying to solve, its innovation efforts often become scattered. Without a shared understanding of reality, we tend to pursue multiple initiatives that reflect competing narratives. These initiatives may look creative on the surface, but they rarely produce lasting impact because they are not connected to a common purpose. As a result, we frequently conclude that our efforts would be more successful if only we had more resources. We begin to believe that the primary obstacle to innovation is a lack of money, staff, or time. This conclusion feels logical, but it leads us into one of the most persistent and limiting barriers to innovation: a resource-dependent mindset.

This mindset emerges subtly. We look around and see tight budgets, limited staff capacity, aging facilities, and shrinking enrollment numbers. In that context, it seems natural to believe that innovation requires more. More money, more people, more attention from donors, or more visibility in the market. We begin to frame our strategic plans around hypothetical futures where additional resources become available. Until then, we convince ourselves, all we can do is keep the existing system running as best we can.

This way of thinking may appear responsible, even prudent. After all, being a good steward means working within one's limits. But if we are not careful, that carefulness becomes constraining. We find ourselves defending the status quo, not because we believe it is working, but because it feels too risky to imagine anything else without guaranteed funding to support it. Innovation becomes something that must be purchased, and until it can be, we wait.

Over time, this waiting posture shapes institutional culture. Instead of asking what could or should be different, we ask what we can afford. That question narrows our imagination. It keeps our focus on refining

current programs, increasing enrollment in existing structures, and squeezing more out of already-stretched systems. We keep the machine running, hoping that eventually something will change. But our energy is tied up in maintenance, not transformation.

What makes this mindset especially difficult to name is that it often comes from a good place. People care about the institution and want to protect what has been built. They are cautious because they know how fragile the current reality is. But that caution, when left unexamined, leads us to believe that we cannot afford to imagine something different. We forget to ask a much more important question: what has God already entrusted to us, and how might we use it differently?

When thinking about innovation, I contend that God has given us the resources to do the work God is calling us to do. If we feel constrained by resources, it could be that we need to adjust our understanding of what God is calling us to do rather than pray for God to “bless” our ideas and plans. Innovation does not begin with looking for more room in the budget. It begins with attentiveness to what has already been entrusted to us. That includes the people who make up our community, the relationships we have with local churches and ministry partners, the wisdom and experience that reside within the school, and the clarity of our mission. These are not just assets to be managed. They are gifts to be stewarded creatively and courageously.

If we believe that God provides what we need to be faithful, then we can approach innovation from a different starting point. We can ask how we might rearrange our efforts, reimagine our structures, and renew our commitments without waiting for external permission or new funding. That kind of posture invites us to focus on calling rather than constraint. It encourages discernment, experimentation, and trust.

It also helps us see that the problem is often not a lack of resources, but a lack of alignment—between our mission and our practices, our espoused theology and our operational assumptions, our educational philosophy and our processes. For example, if we never question our underlying assumptions and philosophies, we will move forward as if everything is already correct. The assumed solution, then, will almost always be that we simply need better marketing or improved execution. We will always be chasing more of something. But if we are willing to question those underlying assumptions, we may discover that the innovation we need is not more of the same, but a different way of imagining our task altogether.

The resource-dependent mindset is difficult to break because it is embedded in how we think about sustainability, excellence, and responsibility. But breaking it is essential if we want to move beyond incremental adjustments and toward meaningful change. It is also essential because it helps us avoid creating an idol out of institutional sustainability. Once the goal becomes “ensuring the survival of the institution” we have created an idol that will exert power and influence over our decisions. Instead, we need to begin with the conviction that God has already given us what we need to take a faithful next step. The challenge is not to acquire more, but to see differently and to act accordingly.

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BARRIER 4: UNEXAMINED EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

The resource-dependent mindset often keeps us focused on what we lack. But it also keeps us from asking more foundational questions. We assume that the core of what we are doing is already sound and that we simply need better implementation. We conclude that more money, better marketing, or stronger enrollment pipelines will help us execute our existing model more effectively. However, this assumption reveals a deeper issue: the misalignment between our mission and the philosophies that shape how we educate.

Too often, we operate as if our educational philosophy is above examination. When innovation stalls or when pressures mount, we look outward for solutions rather than inward at our assumptions. The result is a kind of institutional blame game. We attribute the problem to recruitment, communication, finances, or external pressures. Rarely do we ask whether the underlying structure and purpose of our educational model itself might need to change.

This is one of the most persistent and overlooked barriers to innovation. Our educational philosophies are those quiet assumptions about what learning is, how it happens, and what it is. They shape nearly every decision we make. These ideas influence how we design programs, how we assess students, how we structure courses, and how we define success. And yet, they are almost never named or examined directly.

In most schools, conversations about innovation revolve around delivery formats, tuition models, marketing strategies, or assessment tools. These conversations are not unimportant, but they are often constrained by a narrow range of acceptable thinking. Even bold proposals tend to assume that the foundational philosophy of education is already correct. We simply need to modernize or optimize what we are doing.

But this kind of surface-level adaptation does not lead to transformative innovation. Theological schools operate within a broader landscape of higher education, and that context comes with inherited assumptions—about authority, expertise, credentialing, hierarchy, and the nature of knowledge itself. These assumptions are not neutral. They reflect a particular cultural and philosophical lineage, one that may not always align with the communities theological schools are called to serve.

When we accept those assumptions uncritically, we limit the scope of change we are willing to consider. We reinforce models that may no longer serve our mission well. For instance, we may continue to organize our curriculum around credit hours, classroom hours, and disciplinary silos even when those structures may push against the very kinds of formation we espouse in our teaching on theology. We may continue to define success in ways that reflect particular standards of excellence that diminish alternative ways of knowing. We may miss alternative pathways to theological education not because they are unfaithful or unworkable, but because they were never considered. We rarely question the assumptions and philosophies that undergird our work.

This is why unexamined educational philosophies are so difficult to name. They rarely show up as explicit policies or agenda items. They operate quietly in the background, shaping how decisions are made and what possibilities are considered viable. Because they are embedded in our habits and routines, they can feel natural, even necessary, until we stop to ask where they came from and whether they still serve our mission.

Breaking free from this barrier requires the courage to ask deeper questions. What do we believe theological education is for? What kind of formation are we trying to cultivate? Who defines what counts as learning? What voices and traditions are shaping our definitions of excellence and success? These questions are not theoretical. They have practical consequences. They affect how we design programs, how we walk with people, and how we steward resources.

If we never ask these questions, we will continue to make surface-level adjustments while leaving the deeper framework untouched. We will keep doing more without doing anything differently. Eventually, we will find ourselves stuck. We will be busy, committed, and faithful in intention, but unable to move toward the kind of transformation required.

Fostering fresh expressions of theological education begins with the willingness to question even the most familiar assumptions. Until we are ready to examine our educational philosophies, our efforts at change will remain constrained. But when we open that conversation, we create space for something new to emerge. We begin to imagine theological education that is not just responsive to external pressures, but deeply aligned with the communities we serve and the gospel we proclaim.

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BARRIER 5: CREATIVE PARALYSIS

Fostering fresh expressions of theological education begins with the willingness to question even the most familiar assumptions. Until we are ready to examine our educational philosophies, our efforts at change will remain constrained. But when we open that conversation, we create space for something new to emerge. We begin to imagine theological education that is not just responsive to external pressures but is also deeply aligned with the communities we serve and the gospel we proclaim.

When we do not engage that deeper work, a different kind of inertia starts to settle in. We start to substitute creativity for change. We shift from discerning and doing to imagining and refining. Slowly, the work of innovation becomes centered not on practice, but on ideas. And that constant focus on generating new ideas becomes debilitating. It is a barrier to innovation that I call creative paralysis.

The literature on innovation suggests that the best way to pursue innovation is to try something, learn from it, and then make adjustments. It is a rhythm of doing, reflecting, and refining. That rhythm is not just a method, it is a way of paying attention, of remaining open to the Spirit, of practicing discernment through action. Over time, it can lead to deep insight, surprising clarity, and meaningful transformation. But too often, institutions treat innovation as something very different. Instead of seeing it as movement or a way of being, they treat it as generating new ideas for programs or messaging or fundraising. It is as if the problem is a lack of creative ideas.

This shift is subtle. It does not feel like resistance. In fact, it usually feels like progress. Teams brainstorm. Leaders imagine possibilities. Committees draft vision statements and write proposals. There is energy in the room. But over time, the community begins to feel stuck. Ideas multiply, but nothing takes shape.

Creative paralysis can take root in two ways. First, it can come from all of the “work” devoted to generating a constant flow of new ideas. Second, it can come from placing too much pressure on getting an idea right before anything begins. In both cases, innovation is no longer a way of being (i.e., paying attention, of remaining open to the Spirit, of practicing discernment through action.) Instead, it becomes a task. In one case, it is overwhelming because too much time is focused on generating ideas. In another case, it is overwhelming because the quest for certainty is never satisfied. In both situations, the energy that could have fueled change gets absorbed into cycles of planning.

This pattern is difficult to name because it is usually accompanied by good intentions. People want to get things right. They care about the work. They do not want to waste time, energy, or resources. But what often goes unrecognized is that the process of learning, the work of discernment, and the act of faithfulness all require movement. They require us to do something, not just think about doing something. Over time, creative paralysis creates a kind of organizational fatigue. The language of innovation continues to circulate, but the sense of urgency begins to fade. People remain hopeful in theory but disengaged in practice.

The solution is not to abandon reflection or planning. Those disciplines are vital. But they must be balanced by action. Innovation that leads to transformation grows out of iterative movement. It starts small, learns honestly, and grows through faithful adaptation. It values trying as much as thinking. It honors the unknown by moving toward it with curiosity and care.

Breaking out of creative paralysis requires a shift in posture. We need to believe that we do not need a perfect idea to take a faithful step. We need to recognize that clarity often comes through doing. When we remember that innovation is not about ideas alone, we free ourselves to act. We allow ourselves to experiment, to listen, to adjust, and to keep going.

So how do we overcome this barrier and the others we have identified? My suggestion is that we do so by engaging in a series of practices that cultivate a way of being which is open to ongoing change. Just like spiritual formation comes through faithful engagement in practices, so it is with organizational formation. To be formed into an organization that fosters fresh expressions of theological education, we must be attentive

to particular practices.

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INTRODUCING THE THREE AREAS OF FOCUS

If we want to overcome the barriers that prevent innovation in theological education, we need more than new ideas. We need shared practices that help institutions live into their mission. These practices provide a foundation for discerning, developing, implementing, and evaluating innovation in ways that are faithful and effective.

I suggest there are eight such practices. They are long-term commitments that shape an institution. These practices are grouped into three areas of focus. Each area addresses a different aspect of innovation, and each one builds on the others.

Trustworthy Community

Innovation does not begin with new programs or models. It begins with trust. That means building a community where people belong and where their contributions are valued. A trustworthy community is one in which values are lived, not just spoken. It is marked by honesty, care, and shared responsibility. I suggest there are three practices that help to cultivate trustworthy community.

- Practice One: Practice What You Preach – Aligning espoused values and lived experience
- Practice Two: Risk Openness – Stewarding resources with transparency
- Practice Three: Practice Trust – Developing a resilient community

Shared Reality

Even the most committed community will struggle to innovate if people are not working from a common understanding of what is happening. Without shared reality, efforts become scattered, and solutions compete with one another. A shared reality helps the community clarify its purpose, name its challenges, and move forward together. Two practices have emerged as helpful means for developing and living into a shared reality.

- Practice Four: Define Reality – Rallying around the problem you are trying to solve
- Practice Five: Listen to the Spirit – Clarifying direction while welcoming diversity

Empowering Structures

Trust and clarity are necessary, but they are not enough. Institutions also need structures that support innovation. Governance models, decision-making processes, and organizational design can either encourage or inhibit change. Empowering structures create space for collaboration, flexibility, and ongoing learning. The final three practices help organizations engage in practices that empower rather than suppress voices in the community.

- Practice Six: Release Power – Empowering new voices through collaborative governance
- Practice Seven: Think Broadly – Configuring ecosystems
- Practice Eight: Adapt Freely – Celebrating failure and resisting permanence

Each of these practices contributes to a more faithful and responsive approach to innovation. They are commitments to be cultivated over time. Together, they form a framework that helps institutions move beyond technical fixes and toward real transformation.

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PRACTICE #1 – PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

Aligning Espoused Values with Lived Experience

Fostering fresh expressions of theological education begins by building trustworthy community. Cultivating such a community is not easy. Trust is not built through inspiring language, good intentions, or simply increasing the amount of time people spend together. It is formed through practices. I suggest there are three such practices that can nurture trustworthy community. The first we will address is alignment. For innovation to take root as a way of being, institutions need to embody the values they espouse.

Most theological schools lead with strong values. Words like justice, humility, transformation, and formation appear in mission statements, websites, and strategic plans. These values are often taken seriously and sincerely. Yet, even with the best of intentions, many institutions struggle to align espoused values and lived experience. This is not because of malice or neglect. It is because the systems, practices, and philosophical commitments that shape daily operations have usually been inherited from models designed for different purposes.

Decision-making structures, program development, communication routines, and governance models often

reflect priorities such as institutional preservation, centralized control, particular types of academic performance, or operational separation. These systems may still function, but they do not always support the values the institution now claims to hold. When these inherited systems are not examined, a gap begins to grow between what the institution says and what people experience.

We don't tend to notice this misalignment because we rarely question underlying assumptions about our work. It's why, for example, a school may espouse justice as an important value while continuing to have operational structures that burden students with unsustainable levels of educational debt. We can also see it when formation is named as a goal, but the only recognized measure of excellence is academic performance. Another example could be when a school talks about being student-centered but builds program structures around a calendar that is most convenient for faculty. These examples are not failures of intent. No one is setting out to foster misalignment. Instead, they are signs that the institution's actions have not yet caught up to its convictions.

The practice of aligning espoused values with lived experience begins by acknowledging this reality. It does not assume that things are already aligned. It assumes that some level of misalignment is always present and that addressing it is an ongoing responsibility. Engaging in this practice, therefore, is not an attempt to fix everything at once. It is about cultivating a posture of learning across the whole organization.

That learning posture requires humility and disruption. As institutions begin to name areas of misalignment, they must also be prepared for the implications. Many of the traditional processes used to include voices or gather input will no longer be sufficient. Over time, those processes may even become harmful because they reinforce existing patterns of exclusion or control. As alignment deepens, older ways of engaging the community can feel inadequate or even performative.

This inclusion of new voices is one of the more difficult aspects of the work. When new voices are invited to speak into decisions, it can unsettle those who were used to being heard first or used to having their own space and time to talk about decisions. When long-standing structures are questioned, it can create discomfort. But these disruptions are signs that the institution is taking seriously the values it espouses.

In that way, the language of "values" begins to dissipate over time. It is replaced with a commitment to shared practices. In short, what an institution does (i.e., its actions) communicates what it believes and values. When there is misalignment, trust will be nearly impossible to build. This practice, therefore, is about embracing the ongoing work of becoming more faithful to what we claim to believe. It invites the whole community to pay attention to the ways practices may unintentionally contradict commitments. And it opens the door to new patterns of participation, where every voice is seen as essential to the life of the whole. Over time, this kind of alignment builds trust and strengthens the integrity of the institution by making it more coherent, more honest, and more responsive to the mission it serves.

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PRACTICE #2 – REVEAL DATA

Sharing and Asking for Information

If theological schools hope to foster fresh expressions of theological education, they must be willing to risk openness. If theological schools hope to foster fresh expressions of theological education, they must move beyond passive transparency toward the radical, active, and communal practice of sharing and asking. This practice begins with how the institution stewards the resources God has entrusted to it. It is a deliberate and consistent commitment to making information available to everyone (e.g., staff, faculty, and board) in the same format and at the same time.

In many institutions, information is distributed selectively. Financial statements are shared with one group, enrollment figures with another, and operational updates with a third. These fragmented versions of reality rarely align. When people operate with partial information, it creates confusion, suspicion, and fragmented decision-making. It also fosters a culture where information becomes a tool of control, deepening mistrust and reinforcing power dynamics that divide the community.

To foster trust, we must treat information as a shared resource rather than a guarded privilege. Audited financials, monthly statements, giving reports, enrollment trends, debt totals, endowment figures, and other quantitative data should be shared openly across the community. Everyone should have access to the same data with the same level of detail. That kind of openness may feel radical, but only because educational institutions have long been shaped by habits of selective reporting and competitive governance. It should not be radical to practice active truth-telling.

This practice also extends beyond numbers. We must be open about how the organization allocates its time, attention, and energy (e.g., how capacity is being used, which opportunities are being pursued, and what initiatives are underway). This qualitative information helps the community understand not only how financial resources are being stewarded but also how the institution is stewarding its opportunities and focus.

To make this sustainable, institutions can create a shared dashboard that is updated regularly and accessible to all. Those who have information share it. Those who need information ask for it. This rhythm of open and active communication transforms transparency into a shared discipline of truth-telling that aligns values with lived experience and strengthens trust across the community.

The value of this practice is not found in the data itself but in the alignment and trust it cultivates. When everyone works from the same information, they are more likely to operate from a shared understanding of reality. That shared reality strengthens unity, clarifies priorities, and reinforces a sense of belonging.

Stewarding resources through active truth-telling is not about control. It is about clarity. It is about creating the

conditions where honest conversation can happen, where trust can grow, and where decisions are grounded in a common understanding of what is real. It is a way of being open together, even when the data is difficult to see.

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PRACTICE #3 – DEVELOPING A RESILIENT COMMUNITY

Trust is often seen as the product of familiarity. We assume that if we spend enough time together, trust will naturally follow. In theological schools, this can lead to a focus on shared meals, retreats, or inter-departmental meetings as the primary means of building trust. While these practices can be meaningful, they are not enough to cultivate the kind of trust that supports long-term innovation.

Resilient trust is not built through sentiment or proximity alone. It is built through repeated experiences of competence, concern, and problem-solving. When people see that others are capable, that they care, and that they are willing to work together to solve real problems, trust begins to grow. It becomes more than a feeling and begins to be the connective tissue that strengthens the resilience of the community.

This insight, articulated by Cory Scheer in his book *Closing the Trust Gap*, invites us to look at trust through the lens of both people and policies. Trust does not depend only on individual character or interpersonal relationships. It also depends on the structures that shape how people interact. When an institution organizes its work in ways that consistently demonstrate competence, care, and problem-solving, trust becomes a lived experience rather than an abstract idea.

The first two practices in the category of Trustworthy Community (Practice What You Preach and Risk Openness) cultivate trust. Alignment and transparency bring concerns into the open, which allows the community to face challenges together. They cultivate a shared responsibility

In this context, trust becomes durable. It is no longer dependent on perfect agreement or uninterrupted harmony. It can withstand disagreement and navigate uncertainty. It encourages broad participation in problem-solving by making space for risk, creativity, and failure. Most importantly, it does this while assuring people that they are not alone.

A resilient community is one in which wisdom is not concentrated in a single role or department. It is distributed. Insights can come from any part of the organization, and new ideas are not evaluated based on where they come from, but on how they serve the mission. This kind of community is not easy to build, and it

cannot be rushed. But when it exists, it becomes one of the most powerful assets an institution can hold.

Trust is not the result of a single decision or moment. It is the cumulative effect of consistent, shared practices. It becomes the foundation for innovation that is not reactive or superficial, but sustained and transformative.

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PRACTICE #4 – DEFINE REALITY

Rallying Around the Problem You Are Trying to Solve

When institutions pursue innovation, they often begin by proposing new solutions. New programs, new delivery models, new strategic partnerships, or other familiar starting points. However, when innovation begins with solutions, it rarely leads to lasting change. If innovation is a practice, a way of being, then it needs to start with clarity. I suggest that clarity comes from defining the reality we are facing.

Defining reality is not about refining spreadsheets or producing yet another internal report. It is about seeing what is true. While this includes facts and figures, it also includes the experiences of people who are (or have been) part of the community. Defining reality is not just a practice of sharing and understanding data. We must humanize the data by seeking to understand the people, context, and community we are called to serve.

Yes, this means talking honestly about the data. Enrollment trends, financial performance, and student debt must be named without spin. It also means asking difficult questions about educational philosophy and organizational design. For example, if our curriculum is built entirely around credit hours, we need to be willing to ask why. Credit hours are not neutral. They reflect specific cultural and historical assumptions. In many cases, they privilege certain groups while marginalizing others.

But defining reality is not only about confronting difficult data or analyzing abstract systems. It is also about listening. That includes listening to voices that are often absent or silenced (e.g., students who left without completing a program, staff members who no longer trust the institution, partners who have stopped engaging, or staff who are not usually involved in particular conversations). These voices often carry insights that are missing from internal reports. They help surface the human cost of decisions and assumptions that may otherwise remain hidden.

Conversations with students, alumni, faculty, board members, pastors, business leaders, and nonprofit partners can reveal patterns that data alone cannot show. These conversations are most helpful when they are focused not on solving problems, but on naming them. It is tempting to move quickly toward brainstorming or

strategy. But when we rush toward solutions, we often end up talking past one another. Solutions that sound promising to one group may feel irrelevant or even harmful to another.

Defining reality requires patience. It requires the discipline to stay with the problem long enough to understand it. It also requires shared access to clear, transparent data. The combination of honest listening and reliable information helps communities move from vague concern to specific understanding. It makes it possible to describe the problem in terms that are shared across the institution.

Once people begin to agree on what the problem actually is, energy begins to shift. Instead of competing over ideas, the community can begin to work together. But that cooperation is only possible when the problem has been clearly named.

Defining reality is not about critique for the sake of critique. It is about truthfulness. It is about bringing together what we see, hear, and experience, so that we can understand more clearly what is happening and why it matters. That clarity lays the groundwork for meaningful innovation, not because it gives us the answers, but because it helps us start from the same place.

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PRACTICE #5 – LISTEN TO THE SPIRIT

Clarifying Direction While Welcoming Diversity

As discussed earlier, it is important to define reality as a community. While it is a vital aspect of innovation, the danger with defining reality is that once we do it, we tend to let that frame guide our thinking for years to come. As a result, that frame becomes a box. We develop plans to address the challenges we see inside it, and we launch new initiatives that fit the assumptions we have made. If we are not careful and continually seeking to understand reality and the problem to solve, over time, we stop asking whether the frame itself needs to change. Our vision becomes narrowed.

Instead of building fixed strategies from static definitions, we need to engage in strategic work that begins with discernment. The work of innovation must be rooted in identifying and following the direction in which the Spirit is leading. When we focus on direction rather than on specific programs, staffing models, organizational structures, or numerical goals, we keep the path open for continued learning, listening, and movement.

Strategic thinking is a form of stewardship. It is how we tend to the mission, resources, relationships, and opportunities God has entrusted to us. That stewardship begins with prayer and discernment, by clarifying our mission and calling. Then we ask whom we are called to serve, how we might serve them well, and what is

needed to do so faithfully. From there, we articulate a strategic direction. That direction points toward activity that is aligned with our calling without requiring a complete roadmap in advance.

This approach is not driven by conventional definitions of success. Growth, revenue, or scale may result from faithful work, but if they become our aim we may end up idolizing the institution. Instead, obedience becomes the measure. Direction becomes the guide. And strategy becomes a way of staying faithful in a changing context.

I suggest this kind of strategic oversight must be iterative. Yes, it involves planning, but it also requires flexibility. We must pay attention to what we learn as we go. Using tools like dashboards as part of the aforementioned four practices, we can ensure our understanding of reality remains open to continued reflection and refinement. It is shaped by conversations about alignment, by data about how we are using the resources we've been given, and by the opportunities we notice emerging around us.

This kind of discernment often requires us to dismantle old approaches to strategy, especially those that produce long-term static plans. Instead, we turn toward real-time processes that focus on movement and clarity of direction rather than control. The same holds true for how we think about who is involved in this process. Crucially, this work of discernment cannot belong to just a few people. It is not the responsibility of the board alone. It is not limited to faculty, administrators, or executive leaders. If strategy is a discernment process, and if innovation is to be Spirit-led, then the whole community must be involved. Students, staff, faculty, board members, and partners all have perspectives that help reveal what God may be doing. Welcoming that diversity is essential. The broader the participation, the more likely we are to see clearly and move faithfully. This is why the final area of focus: Empowering Structures, is so important.

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PRACTICE #6 – RELEASE POWER

Empowering New Voices Through Collaborative Governance

Even when a community is trustworthy and a shared view of reality has been cultivated, meaningful innovation will stall if the structures of governance work against it. Too often, our organizational design and decision-making processes reflect assumptions that privilege control, protect existing roles, and narrowly define whose voices matter. Without changes to these systems, the work of innovation becomes constrained, fragmented, or abandoned altogether.

This is especially true when institutions treat innovation as a task reserved for senior leadership or as a matter of creating new programs. In that mindset, governance becomes a means of approving initiatives rather than a

shared process of discernment. It becomes reactive rather than formative. Most importantly, it quietly reinforces the idea that “innovation” is something managed by a few people with power and everyone else in the organization must simply accept it.

The way in which power is often held or controlled within institutions is at the core of this challenge. Institutions often operate within a shared governance framework that divides authority between faculty, administration, and boards. While this approach is intended to distribute responsibility, it often leads to internal competition. As a result, groups tend to guard their areas of influence. Time, attention, and resources are treated as scarce. And decisions are filtered through the lens of protection rather than possibility. While this is sometimes intentional, in many cases the competitive structures and practices are simply inherited and unexamined. The holding of control, therefore, may not be malicious but it is nonetheless present.

In this context, certain voices are privileged. Faculty typically control curriculum. Boards oversee financial and strategic decisions. Administrators manage operations. Others, such as students, staff, and external partners, may be invited to offer feedback, but they rarely hold power to shape direction. Over time, this creates a culture in which wisdom is assumed to flow from the top down, and creativity is expected to conform to existing structures.

For innovation to take root, this pattern must be disrupted. Power must be released. That release is not about removing responsibility from boards or faculty or administrators. It is about expanding the table and recognizing that collaborative governance requires more than representation. It requires the actual distribution of influence.

Curricular conversations must include those who understand the lived experience of students and the needs of partner organizations. Strategic direction must be shaped by those who are engaged in day-to-day ministry, spiritual formation, and support. Financial oversight must be transparent and participatory, not managed solely within the boundaries of a select few. When power remains concentrated, the institution’s imagination remains limited.

Releasing power in this way is not a loss of control. It is an act of faith. It acknowledges that the Spirit can speak through anyone and that our communities are healthiest when they listen broadly. It also makes space for new insights, broader ownership, and deeper alignment with the mission we share.

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PRACTICE #7 – THINK BROADLY

Configuring Ecosystems

As we have noted, innovation in theological education is often treated as an exercise in technical change. Often, this means it is relegated to the area of “program development.” A new initiative is launched, a degree is revised, a delivery model is updated. These actions may be necessary, but if they are pursued in isolation, they rarely produce lasting change. Instead, this fosters creative paralysis. Institutions may find themselves busy with projects, but disconnected in purpose. The isolated nature of such a focus on technical change or targeted creativity around programs may seem to produce short-term results.

In practice, however, theological education is not a collection of independent parts. It is a deeply integrated whole. Anything we do in one area of institutional life inevitably affects the others. A curriculum change reshapes student services. A shift in partnerships influences assessment. A financial decision impacts the pace and scope of learning. Therefore, any fresh expression of theological education must be integrated with the broader life of the institution. Innovation is not about creating something new on the side. It is about attending to the relationships between all parts of the system.

This way of thinking draws on the work of Larry Keeley and his Ten Types of Innovation. In my adaptation of it, I refer to it as integrated innovation. Rather than focusing on isolated solutions or better products, integrated innovation considers the full context in which the institution operates. It asks how the different dimensions of the school (e.g., academic, financial, relational, organizational) interact with one another. It seeks alignment, not just activity. And it invites the community to think in terms of systems, not silos.

Integrated innovation also challenges institutions to reimagine how they relate to the broader ecosystem of theological education. No school operates in a vacuum. Churches, nonprofits, community organizations, donors, and ministry partners all contribute to the formation of students. Rather than trying to do everything alone, institutions can begin to think like platforms. Configuring themselves, therefore, in ways that invite collaboration and shared value creation.

This approach requires a shift in posture. Instead of building programs that assume all expertise and resources are housed internally, institutions begin to see themselves as part of a network. They identify opportunities to partner, to share, and to co-create. They recognize that students are shaped not only by what happens inside the classroom, but also by what they encounter across the broader landscape of their formation.

Thinking broadly in this way allows institutions to be more agile and responsive. It helps them steward resources more effectively and opens space for new voices and perspectives. Most importantly, it reflects a deeper theological truth: that formation is communal, and that innovation flourishes when the body of Christ works together.

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PRACTICE #8 – ADAPT FREELY

Celebrating Failure and Resisting Permanence

Each of the practices we've looked at so far works together to lay the foundation for the final practice, which is to adapt freely. Without celebrating failure and resisting permanence, we fail to cultivate a new way of being. Instead, we fall back into the trap of approaching innovation as a one-time effort. For lasting impact, we must recognize that innovation is not about launching a single program or executing a detailed plan. It is about cultivating a posture of responsiveness, one that is shaped by listening, learning, and adjusting over time. That kind of posture does not emerge from a desire for permanence. It grows out of the conviction that change is ongoing and that transformation is part of the Christian life.

In many institutions, however, the desire for stability can become an obstacle. Programs are designed to last. Structures are built to endure. Success is measured by what remains rather than by what grows. As a result, communities may become hesitant to try new things unless they are confident those things will work. Risk is avoided. Failure is feared. And innovation begins to slow down under the weight of permanence.

To adapt freely is to reject the idea that permanence is the goal. It is to recognize that every step forward is simply the next iteration. Every structure, program, and process is a step forward, not the final step. Our goal is not survival; it is obedience. Our goal is to be responsive to the Spirit and faithful in our stewardship. In this approach, anything we create is for the season it was created to serve. When it no longer serves that purpose or when the community discerns a new direction is needed, it is time to change.

This practice builds on what we have said about discernment. Just as listening to the Spirit invites us to follow direction rather than enforce a plan, adapting freely invites us to treat strategy as something that unfolds. It means creating space for regular reflection. It means analyzing outcomes and learning from results. And it means holding our work loosely, ready to shift course when needed.

That includes the willingness to learn from failure. When experiments do not produce the intended results, we do not hide them. We name them, reflect on them, and celebrate what they reveal. Every failed initiative is an opportunity to gain insight, deepen understanding, and improve our work. As Warner Burke has said, "The change initiative must never stop." His words are a stark reminder that the work of transformation is never complete. As followers of Jesus, this reality should resonate with us. God is not stationary. Unchanging? Yes. Stagnant? No! We are always in the process of becoming something. This is as true for institutions as it is for individuals and communities.

In that light, failure becomes part of our learning, part of our becoming. It is not a reason to retreat. It is a reason to continue. When we engage with what did not work, we position ourselves to discover what might work in the future. We also model the kind of openness and humility that theological education seeks to form in others. We show that we are not clinging to certainty. We are pursuing faithfulness.

Resisting permanence does not mean rejecting structure. It means being open to change within the structures we hold. It means recognizing that permanence is not the measure of success. Obedience is. When we keep our eyes on the mission and stay attentive to the Spirit, we begin to build institutions that are agile, resilient, and ready to participate in the ongoing work of God.

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CONCLUSION – MOVING FORWARD

Practicing Innovation in Theological Education

Fostering fresh expressions of theological education may be the most important work we can do in this season. Over the past several decades, we have witnessed significant shifts that have shaped and reshaped the landscape of theological education. Tuition has increased. Student debt has grown. Dropout rates remain high. Enrollment surged for a time but has since declined, and in many places the perceived value of theological education has eroded. At the same time, the relationship between the church and the academy has grown more fragile.

Ted Smith refers to this pattern as an unraveling, and that may be the most accurate word for what we are experiencing. It is not a simple story of decline. It is the loosening of structures and assumptions that once held things together. In some ways, that unraveling feels disorienting. But it can also be a gift. Because when things come apart, we are given the opportunity to ask what still matters, what must be reimaged, and what the Spirit might be inviting us to become.

This series has offered one way of engaging that opportunity. It began with the theological foundations for innovation: our calling to participate in God's mission, to practice ongoing discernment, and to steward what has been entrusted to us. It named five barriers that often keep institutions from moving forward. And it introduced eight practices that can help communities foster trustworthy relationships, develop a shared view of reality, and create structures that empower rather than constrain.

None of these practices are formulas. They are not prescriptions for growth or guarantees of success. They are postures, habits, and ways of being that open space for the Spirit to work. They invite institutions to align

their words and actions, to steward information with clarity, to build resilient trust, and to define problems with both data and empathy. They call for a form of strategy rooted in discernment, not control. They require us to release power, think in terms of systems, and embrace change as a continuous process of learning.

To practice innovation in this way is to walk a different path than the one offered by conventional approaches to change. It is slower. It is more relational. And it is more disruptive. But it is also more faithful. Because at its core, innovation in theological education is not about institutional preservation. It is about forming communities that are able to respond to God's call with imagination, courage, and hope.

This is not easy work. But it is necessary. And it is worth doing together. The challenges facing theological education are significant. But so is the opportunity. As the unraveling continues, we have the chance to weave something new.

Let us move forward not with fear, but with trust. Not with anxiety, but with openness. Not with nostalgia, but with hope. Let us practice innovation not because we are chasing what is next, but because we are committed to joining Jesus on mission.

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